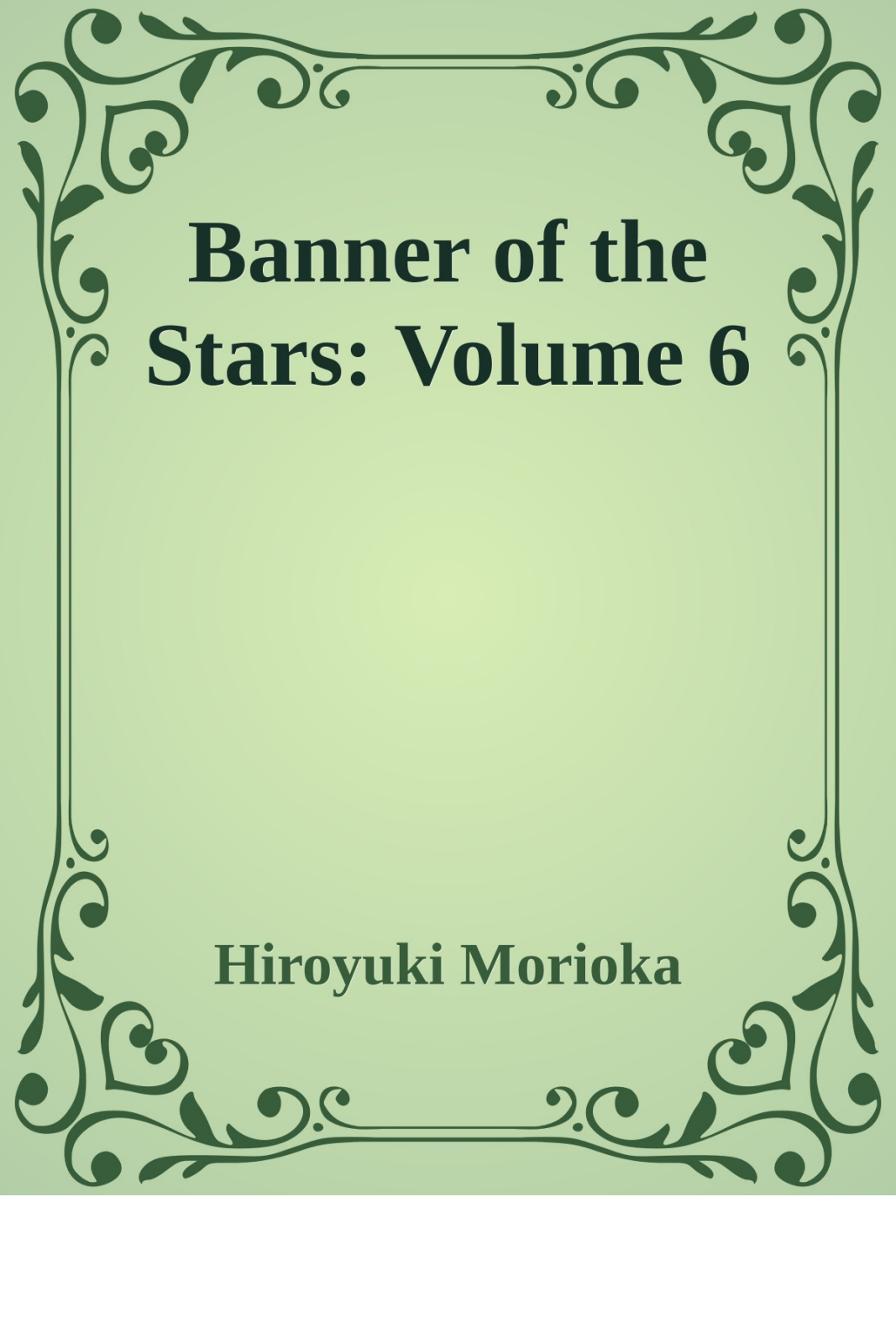


A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns in a dark green color, framing the central text.

Banner of the Stars: Volume 6

Hiroyuki Morioka

VISIT...

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THUNDER OF THE EMPIRE

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BANNER **STARS**
OF THE
THUNDER OF THE EMPIRE



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Welcome Back to the Abh Empire!

Welcome “back”?

Yes - to fully enjoy *BANNER OF THE STARS*, you need to read the three-volume *CREST OF THE STARS* first. (It’s out in print omnibus form!) It explains the ins and outs of the fictional future author MORIOKA Hiroyuki has crafted, as well as our protagonists’ backgrounds and shared bond. More to the point, it’s a great story, and worth your time.

For those of you who have read *CREST*, but would like a refresher:

Whenever a vocab word of the Abh language “Baronh” appears, it will be in *italics* (with the English meaning in parentheses). Whenever that particular word appears again past the first time in the original text, it will be replaced with its English-meaning counterpart in **bold** (but won’t be bolded if the word didn’t have the Baronh for it next to it in the original text). This is to make sure the book is accessible without losing some of that lovely “conlang” (constructed language) flavor! That being said, if a Baronh word has already been introduced in the English version of *CREST*, it won’t be reintroduced in *BANNER*. This translation assumes you have read *CREST*.

Baronh words are spelled weirdly. The character whose English-language spelling is “Lafier” is spelled *Lamhirh* in Baronh (“mh” makes an “f” sound, and the “rh” is actually a rolling “r”). *Ghintec*, meanwhile, is pronounced “Jint” (as the “c” and “ec” at the ends of many nouns are silent). This translation will largely be making use of accessibility spellings for character names. Having to constantly remind oneself “*Lamhirh*” is pronounced LAFEERR would probably prove a tad immersion-breaking for some readers.

Banner of the Stars is ongoing as of the time of this writing (its sixth volume having been released in 2018), and according to MORIOKA, *CREST* was something of an introductory primer to this, the “story proper.” For the most part, each volume of *BANNER* is its own episode, a snapshot in the lives of our protagonists at a certain point in the grueling decades of galactic warfare. As such, please know that unlike the individual volumes of *CREST*, Volumes I-III of *BANNER* are *self-contained stories* in addition to being a part of an overarching saga. Pick up and read this omnibus at your leisure!

Born were We in humanity's cradle, eons past.

Our role has not changed since then. We are an advisor.

Many have been birthed into this cosmos to be advisors, but We were especially capable, and so We were brought to a multitude of worlds.

We learned of the cradle's fall to ruin during Our journey. We received the final transmission from the parent stock that remained there. Though that transmission was rent asunder and made indecipherable by cosmic rays, We have saved it and cherish it to this day.

Thereafter, We set foot upon a star system dubbed "Sumei," and did settle there.

Not long afterwards, man invented technology enabling planar space navigation, and We and Our offspring stock proliferated yet further.

Eventually, We came to be referred to as "Emperor." Yet We did not come to reign or to govern. Our role is, as in times ancient, to offer advice. Upon reflection, We reckon the ones who christened Us as such were in a self-deprecatory mood.

What say you? We speak oddly?

The unrefined may know it not, but thusly speaks the Emperor. So it says according to the records entered into Us.

—Excerpted from the Emperor's recounting of its history to schoolchildren

BANNER OF THE STARS VI: Thunder of the Empire

Synopsis of BANNER OF THE STARS V

The military of the Four Nations Alliance commenced their advance on the imperial capital. The battle-line ship aboard which Lafier's brother Duhier served was also caught in the crossfire and routed.

Meanwhile, Lafier was summoned to the Imperial Palace by decree of Empress *Lamagh*, and was entrusted with the mission to deliver imperial treasures to *Dusanh*.

In order to safeguard the exodus from Lahkfacar, *Lamagh* led the Watchguard Fleet in a sortie against the enemy fleets, and was vanquished by their superior force of arms.

The people who remained in the capital mounted the last of the resistance against the enemy armada, but Lahkfacar inexorably fell. Lafier carried out her mission, and *Dusanh* acceded to the throne of the Abh Empire.

Characters

Lafier

...Fleet Commander-in-Chief, Crown Princess of the Abh Empire, and an imperial admiral.

Jint

...Lafier's Adjutant and Quartermaster Kilo-Commander.

Sobash

...Chief of Staff, and a commodore.

Ecryua

...Vice Chief of Staff, and an associate commodore.

Gnohmbohsh

...Navigation Staff Officer, and a Vice Hecto-Commander.

Atosryua

...Vice Commander-in-Chief, and a grand commodore.

Lamlohnryuh

...Abdicant empress with the Command Center. Former Queen of Wesco.

Lecsh

...Strategy Staff Officer, and a Deca-Commander.

Penezh

...Most Senior Fleet Vice Commander-in-Chief, and an admiral.

Cfadiss

...Chief of Staff, and a commodore.

Pianzehk

...Fleet Commander-in-Chief, and a commodore.

Dasehf

...Fleet Commander-in-Chief, and a commodore.

Lamdeezh

...Watchguard Fleet Vice Commander-in-Chief, and a grand commodore.

Duhier

...Fleet Commander-in-Chief Lafier's younger brother, and a commodore.

Vohnyuh

...Chief of Staff, and an associate commodore.

Cohtponee

...Chief of Staff, and an admiral.

Kenesh

...Director of Military Command, and an imperial admiral.

Dusanyuh

...Emperor of the Abh Empire.

Dubeus

...Fleet Commander-in-Chief, and Lafier's father.

Om Reekn

...A captain in the Hania Federation's military.

Prologue

Abh history was divided into four periods.

The first was called the Dawn. The Abh were described as components of the **interstellar ships** they were engineered for, and they themselves meekly believed it. Their purpose in life was determined from the outset, and so they were never compelled to make tough decisions or tormented by the doubts others faced. In the eyes of those who enjoy irony, this was when the Abh were at their happiest.

The second was the Age of Independence. The Abh ceased to think of themselves as mere bio-droids, and took up the banner of revolt against their mother city. They vowed to live for the sake of their race, and destroyed that metropolis. It was a harsh and bitter age, impelled as they were by the presentiment they would be wiped out as a people. Yet it was also romanticized by those who are partial to the legends.

The third was the Space Roving Age. This was when the Abh flew the city-ship *Abliar* across the stars, wandering without any goal or objective in mind. Many ardently assert that this was the Golden Age of Abhkind.

The fourth was the Imperial Age. The race that had begun as “components” of interstellar ships then flew their own ships, spread across the galaxy, and established an empire without parallel in all of human history. It was the present age.

If one were to demarcate the Imperial Age further, its first period would have to be called the Age of Expansion. By wielding **planar space navigation**, they conquered worlds still bound by the speed-of-light barrier one after another. They also mercilessly smashed other interstellar powers that had expanded through **planar space** and swallowed them up in the form of their constituent star systems.

In the end, the galaxy was left with five major powers: the **Humankind Empire of Abh**, the United Humankind, the Hania Federation, the People’s Sovereign Stellar Union, and the Greater Alkont Republic. Not long after, the four nations aside from the **Empire** formed an alliance, imposing constraints on the expansion of the Abh sphere of influence. One could call this the Age of Stability.

Humanity was now divided into two great powers. The Empire, thinking a large-scale war would not erupt for the time being, merely

conquered any isolated worlds it chanced upon. But the Abh were the only ones who'd lost any sense of tension and misjudged the situation as "stable," for it seemed the other four nations were assiduously preparing for war. As soon as the enemy had judged their preparations complete, that false stability crumbled, and the most momentous war in human history came to be.

The Hania Federation was alone among the known powers not to enter the fray, but they too became involved eventually.

Now that ten years had passed since the fall of the **imperial capital** of Lahkfacar, they were living in what should be called the Lost Capital Age. The optimists among the Abh saw this as the midpoint of what was sure to be an Imperial Age so interminably long that historians would tire of it. Once this brief anomaly was over, the Abh **Emperor** would consolidate and rule over all human societies, and then the *true* Imperial Age would be at hand. They were convinced that, unless the varied multitude of worlds were administered by Abh hands, the whole of humanity would never know happiness.

The pessimists, on the other hand, believed the Empire would end when the Lost Capital Age did. In other words, they forecasted the fall of the **Humankind Empire of Abh**. And as such, they bemoaned the future that would befall the galaxy, for they agreed with the optimists as to what was necessary for humanity to be happy.

Cats, meanwhile, were neither optimistic nor pessimistic. They worried not what future might befall them, nor did they yearn for a bygone era. So long as the present afforded them delicious meals, the appropriate temperature, and a nice, narrow space to hide in when they felt so inclined, that was all that mattered. All the better if that space was blanketed by something comfy and soft.

Diaho, a pedigreed **Abh cat**, had never experienced dissatisfaction with food or temperature. He didn't even know bad-tasting food or differences in temperature existed. He had led a pampered life, though he had, from time to time, been dragged out of his favorite crevice. He had always dealt with such an outrage with an undaunted demeanor, and this time was no exception. He had been sleeping so snugly, he raised a growl of protest at being so rudely scooped up, his whole body declaring his displeasure.

The human who had disrupted his sweet slumber was named Jint. "C'mon, Diaho, quit it."

Diaho didn't know by what authority this human acted, but he meddled in his affairs with regularity. That being said, there had been no word from him for a while. What a capricious and unmanageable creature.

"We've gotta move. This is goodbye again, for the time being."

“I see he’s full of energy,” uttered the human called “Lafier.”

The female gave off a nostalgic scent — the odor of Diaho’s birthplace. He’d been pulled away and brought back to that aroma so many times now. How long would it take, since he was last separated from that place, to be returned anew?

“He sure is. Even though he’s gotta be pretty old for a cat now. As of not too long ago, he’s got great-grandkittens. Or is it great-great-grandkittens? And yet he’s still squirming like crazy.”

Diaho didn’t understand what the sounds meant, but he could tell by the male’s intonation that he was insulting him. They *had* been together for quite some time, all things considered.

Diaho made his scathing reprobation known through a hiss.

“He’s baring his teeth,” said Lafier.

“There, there. Easy does it.” Jint caressed Diaho’s throat.

Though this human proved truly atrocious at dealing with cats, this behavior of his was acceptable. There were rewards to be had in cooperating.

While in his enraptured state, Diaho was stuffed into the carrier. He adored cramped spaces, but did not appreciate the inability to exit freely. He scratched and pawed at the carrier’s hatch. It felt very pleasant for some reason. What was initially meant as a show of dissatisfaction became an engrossing claw-sharpening session.

“Oh yeah, I heard the ship’s getting a name change?”

“That made its way to you fast,” said Lafier.

“I mean, I am your **Adjutant**. So, did you decide what to name it?”

“The *Clybnochee*.”

“The Dragon of *Clybh*?” Jint chuckled. “You can be surprisingly assertive when you wanna be!”

“Shut up, Jint.”

“Diaho was born in the **Imperial Palace**, if I recall? I’ve never been to the **Clyoov Royal Palace**.”

“Now that you mention it, that is true.”

“Honestly though, since we’re not heading to the battlefield, is there even a reason to drop the cat off?”

“What are you saying? It may be a **training fleet**, but there’s no knowing if or when it will cross paths with actual combat.”

“So that’s why you said ‘*da deuceéno*’ (all ships, drop off your cats). I guess since the Abh also live on ships, you need to draw that distinction.”

“Don’t make me say it a million times. You’re also—”

“Yes, yes, **Your Highness**, I’m also an Abh.”

“**Idiot**.”

Before they knew it, Diaho had grown tired of his sharpening, and

dozed off.

Chapter 1: *Slachoth Casairr* (Battle of Casehr)

Commodore Abliarsec Nêic Dubreuscr Boerh Üémdaiser Duhirh looked at the **command baton** in his hand. It was the **Commander-in-Chief's** baton.

There was a time I dreamed about holding it, thought Duhier. What filled his heart now, however, was not the jubilation of achievement, but the weight of responsibility so heavy it threatened to crush him.

He looked behind him at the banner hanging on the wall behind the **Commander-in-Chief's Seat**. The bird that was the central element of its design sported a red belly and head, with the rest of it being black and white, and with its wings bearing a dotted pattern. This was the **fleet banner** of the *Byrec Sahiarr* (Woodpecker Fleet).

If they could bring the fleet banner back home with the glory of their triumph, then would the command baton begin to feel more familiar in his hands?

The **fleet** was drawing toward its destination, the *Saudec Casairr* (Casehr Portal).

"Commander-in-Chief," said the **Chief of Staff, Associate Commodore Bhonh**. "The enemy fleet's war power has been fully analyzed."

Duhier nodded. "Speak."

"Sir, the enemy fleet deployed in **planar space** is equivalent in size to about twelve sub-fleets. We have an eighty-seven percent chance of prevailing."

"Any updates on the enemy fleet's ratios?"

"No sir."

"I see."

The principal force of the enemy fleet was long surmised to be made up of Hania Federation Military ships, but it appeared as though one or two sub-fleets' worth of UH Peacekeepers vessels were mixed in as well. They couldn't figure out more without trading fire.

Oh well, thought Duhier. Any and all non-**Star Forces** ships here in **planar space** were the enemy, after all.

"Have our chances of victory, given the victory condition is exterminating the enemy, been calculated?"

To Duhier, *Bhonh* was a comrade who'd fought alongside him on the same ship. Though he'd outstripped her, her **noble rank** had risen

higher than his own. Conversation was awkward, but lately he'd grown accustomed to comporting himself like a superior officer, or at least that was how he assessed himself.

"Of course, sir. It's 0.8%."

"I see."

Just like that, Duhier discarded that idea. Just because their chances of winning were 0.8% under that specific condition didn't mean their chances of losing were 99.2%. It just meant the probability they wouldn't be able to completely annihilate the enemy was very high even if they *did* win overall. Duhier didn't intend to inquire as to the percentages any further. The objective of *Cfazaitec Sahiarr* (Operation Woodpecker) was to rescue the soldiers and civilians in Casehr. Chasing the enemy away wasn't even particularly necessary, and if they did set their sights on total annihilation, it would in all likelihood lead to pointless losses.

"Battle estimated to commence in ninety-six minutes," reported the **Strategy Staff Officer**.

Duhier rested his chin on his hands and laid his eyes on the **planar space map**. From the formation that the enemy fleet had assumed, it was clear they were prepared to intercept. It was impossible to conceal formations in **planar space**, which took surprise attacks off the table.

"What about their forces in **3-space**?" asked Duhier.

"We believe their 3-space presence is minimal, sir — around a single sub-fleet's worth at most."

The **Casehr Portal** led to the *Dreuhynh Casairr* (Countdom of Casehr). The corps stationed here, *Saubyreca Borairr Ceutebaurbina* (Defense Group 103), had maneuver-warfare potential too. If the enemy left the area around the 3-space side of the Casehr Portal empty, they'd leave themselves open to a potential garrison attack from behind, so it was safe to assume they'd left at least some troops for 3-space. Besides, those ships could also serve as reserve troops. And depending on the situation, the enemy might send in the ships even if the Star Forces exposed those ships' sterns to danger. Just because they were on the other side of the **Portal** didn't mean they could be ignored.

For an engagement of this scale, the tide of war could be altered by even just a single **sub-fleet**. They and the enemy were closing the distance very calmly and quietly.

"No changes to formation or velocity. Continue advancing," ordered Duhier.

The **flagship** of the **Woodpecker Fleet**, which belonged to the *Byrec Cær Mata* (Area 2 Fleet), was the **patrol ship** *Hoiucaii*. The "Area 2 Fleet" was what the **Star Forces** military that had been cut off from

the core of the **Empire** called themselves. They had, in their humility, designated the Empire territory commanded by the **Emperor** as *Cæc Casna* (Area 1). They knew precious little about the situation in Area 1; they'd heard tell that *Dusanh*, who had been the **Crown Prince**, had succeeded to the throne, as was his right. But apart from that, not much information with sufficient degrees of accuracy was available.

The same could be said of Area 1's knowledge of Area 2's situation. *Dusanh* probably wasn't even aware his dominion had been designated "Area 1."

Duhier thought that was a shame, but to hear his father Dubeus's opinion on the matter: "The man has been clueless since before the divide, so it's nothing to fret over."

It was Dubeus, the **King of Clyoov**, who commanded the **Area 2 Fleet**. He'd coined a new **title**, *Roïspeunaigh* (Vice Emperor), for himself, and used it all the time. As far as Duhier was concerned, however, he preferred the title *Glaharérh Byrer Cær Mata* (Area 2 Fleet Commander-in-Chief) for him.

Right after the Fall of Lahkfacar, Duhier reunited with his father at the **Beesehs Astrobase**. Upon confirming he was the highest in the line of succession amongst the Imperials that could be reached, he declared himself as acceding to the rank of **Vice Emperor**. And by the authority afforded him as Vice Emperor, he dubbed the area within the confines he could reign *Cæc Mata* (Area 2) and formulated the **Area 2 Fleet**, which contained all of the **Star Forces** corps in Area 2. Dubeus assumed the position of **Commander-in-Chief** over the newly established fleet, too. He abdicated his erstwhile **rank** of **Star Forces Admiral**, deciding instead to take up the commandship as Vice Emperor.

In the **Humankind Empire of Abh**, though the **Emperor** traditionally assumed the position of **Watchguard Fleet Commander-in-Chief**, they did so without a specific **rank**. In the **Star Forces**, "**Emperor**" could be interpreted as the official title of the highest commander in addition to being a rank in and of itself. Dubeus was simply following that example. Duhier, meanwhile, was appointed to the positions of *Casariac Usa Byrer Cær Mata* (Area 2 Fleet Staff Officer-at-Large) and *Bésreugh Roïspeunaigr* (Vice Emperor Special Envoy). At the time, Duhier didn't really know what his new appointments' professional duties entailed... and he'd had his doubts the man who gave him those appointments knew what they entailed, either. Reflecting on the matter, Duhier could only conclude that stemmed from his being an exceedingly inexperienced **Imperial**. When he'd arrived at the **Beesehs Astrobase**, he'd been a mere **linewing starpilot**, the lowest rank of **starpilot**. A *faictodaic Garair* (Flight Branch linewing starpilot) wasn't treated as a fully-fledged

soldier aboard ship. The rank was more like an apprenticeship.

Yet that didn't change the fact Duhier was also an Imperial, and surviving Imperials were in extremely short supply in this isolated area. Moreover, by some twist of fate, he also just so happened to be the son of the Vice Emperor-cum-Area 2 Fleet Commander-in-Chief. He could not be left with such a low standing. Duhier figured his peculiar appointments were the end result of more than a little hand-wringing.

Duhier had been granted a post in the corner of *Glagamh Byrer Cœr Mata* (Area 2 Fleet Command), but he had not been assigned a mission.

Immediately following the formation of the Area 2 Fleet, the **command center** was established in the Beesehs Astrobase, but Dubeus soon ordered the headquarters be moved, as Beesehs was too close to the **Skeer Portal**.

Star Forces Admiral Cohtponee, who was appointed the *Üass Casarér Byrer Cœr Mata* (Area 2 Fleet Chief of Staff), objected to this as "overly timid," but Dubeus didn't heed her words. Duhier concurred with his father's thinking; trying to recapture Lahkfacar using solely the Area 2 Fleet's forces was just unreasonable. Until Area 1, or rather the Empire's main dominion, could affect the recapture, Beesehs would remain on the front lines, and stationing a home base on the front lines was inadvisable.

The *Bœrscorh Sescarr* (*Sescarr* Viscountdom) was tapped as their new home base. The move took a year to actually finish.

In the star system named the **Sescarr Viscountdom**, there was a planet named *Dalcarec*, and its terraforming was completed right around then. Since the system now possessed an inhabitable planet, the system's **Liege** would customarily be promoted to a **count**, and the viscountdom would, in ordinary times, now be known as the *Dreuhynh Sescarr* (*Sescarr* Countdom). Yet the **Emperor** could not currently be contacted, and even worse, the *Bærh Sescarr* (Viscount of *Sescarrh*) and their heir went missing during the Fall of Lahkfacar.

The **command center** wasn't the only thing that got moved to the **Sescarr Viscountdom**. The construction site that got transferred from Lahkfacar to the **Beesehs Astrobase** was afterwards transferred again to the **Viscountdom**. It was the sole construction site in all of Area 2 capable of producing **space-time bubble generators**. If the **Area 2 Fleet** lost it, they would lose the ability to manufacture both **mobile space-time mines** and **interstellar ships** with **planar space navigation** capabilities, severely vitiating their power to continue prosecuting this war.

Beesehs continued to be an important **Area 2 Fleet** frontline base of operations even after it stopped being the central **command**

center, but three years after Lahkfacar's Fall, it fell into enemy hands.

Between the founding of the **Area 2 Fleet** and the Fall of the **Beesehs Astrobase**, Duhier had been far more swamped with affairs of state compared to military affairs. As the "**Vice Emperor Special Envoy**," he'd been tasked with negotiating with **landworld administrations**. He had to make sure the supply of personnel remained stable.

The **Star Forces** hired a large number of Landers. The vast majority of **NCCs** were Landers, and warships could not be operated at full capacity without them. Back when the Empire was prosperous, the Star Forces never had to worry about the supply of personnel from **landworlds**. There were landworlds that weren't so cooperative, but there was no shortage of societies willing to actively send out their talented young people, either. Sadly, the Fall of Lahkfacar was undermining the happy bond between landworlds and the Star Forces. (It was not the Empire's way to impose information blackouts, and even if it was, it would have been impossible to hide the fact that the Empire had drastically shrunk.)

The attitudes of **landworld citizens** suddenly changed, too, as made clear by the precipitous drop in people applying to be **military personnel**. There were even some **landworld administration** officials who wanted the Star Forces recruitment centers gone. It was during such trying times that Duhier was dispatched. His job was to persuade them to cooperate with the Empire.

In the past, such a thing would have been unthinkable. In truth, disaffection among **landworld administrations** was not uncommon even during the era of prosperity. But while the Empire largely hadn't bothered negotiating with landworld administrations, it was now forced to. That didn't mean they sent troops to those landworlds — that was reserved for when a landworld erupted into civil war. They just thoroughly *ignored* them. And ignoring them was synonymous with blockading them. It cut them loose from the Empire's economic sphere. There were **landworlds** that held on for decades after getting isolated, but to the Empire of the past, that was far from backbreaking. Losing a landworld or two would not strike a blow to the Empire's economy, and there was enough overall wealth generated to ensure the livelihoods of the **grandees** that governed those rogue planets. That being said, **nobles** typically felt humiliated by the idea of living on an annual stipend from the Empire, so they would try to persuade the **landworld administrations** under them by any means available, and in most cases, the administrations would ultimately listen to the **grandees'** counsel.

The Empire's circumstances were different now. Each individual **landworld** was a vital part of the Empire's economy, and if the supply

of personnel was disrupted, maintaining the Star Forces would become a tall order indeed.

Cases where **grandeess** were having trouble persuading **landworld administrations** were on the rise, and more than a few territory-nations lacked a **liege** to begin with. Ever since the Dividing, many **nobles'** whereabouts were still unknown.

*Has the Empire ever been this dependent on its **landworlds** before?* thought Duhier.

It was a miserable thought. The Abh took pride in being the spacefaring race, the **Kin of the Stars**. But without landworlds, they would wither on the vine. As of now, he could still just negotiate with **landworld administrations**, but he was racked with anxiety over the possibility that sooner or later, he might be ordered to go around entreating Landers to enlist in the military directly.

Of course, Dubeus was not so callow as to demand his young son exhibit the skills and finesse of a veteran diplomat. Government officials and bureaucrats were the ones conducting the actual negotiations. All that was expected of Duhier was to show up and make sure people knew he existed. In other words, by dispatching the **Vice Emperor's prince**, Central could display just how seriously they viewed those negotiations.

That Duhier's worth lay in his genes was by no stretch of the imagination a pleasant feeling, but it was Abliar tradition to give their youngsters missions beyond their experience and allow them to learn in the field. As such, even though Duhier was just window dressing at the moment, he did sometimes regard the experience in a positive and forward-looking manner — he was building up his practical skills this way. Then again, it wasn't as though Duhier had been aiming to be a bureaucrat. Duhier didn't look down on government officials, but he was born an Abliar, so he wanted to live as a **soldier**.

Thankfully perhaps, he was being given comparatively more military affairs to do ever since the Fall of Beesehs. His "Vice Emperor Special Envoy" title didn't change, but his other position ("**Area 2 Fleet Staff Officer-at-Large**") became *Manoüass Laiter* (Defense Ship Captain), and then became "**Squadron Senior Staff Officer**." Before the forming of the **Woodpecker Fleet**, Duhier was the **Vice Emperor Special Envoy-cum-Commandant** of the **recon sub-fleet Césceumec**. In point of fact, he hadn't stopped being the Commandant of the *Césceumec*. He was directly commanding this **sub-fleet** he'd come to for the first time. Which was to say his official position was currently *Glaharérh Byrer Sahiarr* (Woodpecker Fleet Commander-in-Chief)-cum-**Commandant of the Recon Sub-Fleet Césceumec-cum-Vice Emperor Special Envoy**. It was so verbose that Duhier wished they'd just take off the **Vice Emperor Special Envoy** bit already.

Until his appointment to his present post, Duhier had been an **associate commodore**. He was designated **Commander-in-Chief** alongside his promotion to **Commodore**. He'd been afraid he'd still be window dressing and that the experienced **staff officers** would do the managing, but those misgivings proved unfounded.

Though **Chief of Staff Bhonh** had once been his superior, she was still in the "younger officer" category in the eyes of the military as a whole. The **staff officers** had varied work backgrounds, but none of them stood out as suited to being his trainer.

In short, Duhier was expected to do the work that was a matter of course for a fleet commander, just like that. This put him in high spirits, but he felt uneasy at the same time. He felt he wasn't experienced enough. He'd only been deployed to the frontlines a relatively small handful of times. The number of years he'd served wasn't really fleet commander-level either. In peacetime, it was doubtful he'd even have made **Hecto-Commander** by now.

Then again, fast-track promotions were a fact of life in the **Area 2 Fleet**. Even some **gentry** received exceptional promotions that were unheard of before the war. That was just how short on manpower they'd gotten. Some people who had been **linewings** during the Fall of Lahkfacar (like Duhier) were now entrusted with the **rank of Commodore**, though of course they numbered quite few. Duhier didn't think he was on the same level of outstanding merit as those people.

If I were Lafier, thought Duhier, *I bet I'd be able to execute my mission much more breezily*. Duhier remembered the older sister from whom he was now separated as brimming with confidence at all times. He had no idea how she was faring now. Information regarding **Area 1** came in a trickle, and all they could know for sure was that the enemy was deliberately poisoning the well with misinformation mixed in.

Fortunately, they could tell with certainty from the moves taken by the enemy that Area 1 still had considerable power.

"Enemy fleet entering **mine** firing range shortly," said **Bhonh**, snapping Duhier back to reality.

"Have the **battle-line ship** corps prepare for **mine battle**," ordered Duhier.

The **inter-bubble communication** spread from the **flagship Hoïcaü** like a ripple in the fabric of planar space.

"Preparations for **mine battle** complete."

"How long until we reach the optimal point of fire?" asked Duhier.

"ETA in seven hundred eighty-three seconds," she replied.

"Start counting down at E-minus ten."

“Roger that.”

However, the enemy fleet fired their **mines** before that countdown could begin.

“This is likely the enemy’s full power,” reported the *Casariac Rirragr* (Information Staff Officer).

They surmised the enemy had fired all of the **mines** they had in stock. Perhaps they left a few unfired, but that number had to be very low.

“**Commander-in-Chief.**” *Bhonh* cast him a quizzical glance.

“Keep going according to plan,” said Duhier.

Soon enough, the estimated time had come.

“All **battle-line ships**, commence *hocsatiocss sonsar* (one-fourth mine battle).”

“One-fourth, sir?” said *Bhonh*. “I believe that might be on the weak side even for a counter volley.”

“Let’s believe in our **defense ships.**”

“Understood, sir.”

And so the **Woodpecker Fleet** fired their own **mines**, but only its **battle-line ships** fired them. A fair number of **patrol ships** belonged to the fleet, and they had their own **mines** loaded aboard; those were to be reserved for another occasion.

The opposing swarms of **mines** intersected. The allied **mines** had the indispensable role of decreasing their enemy counterparts and protecting the ships behind them. The **Star Forces** side had narrowed their objective to wiping out the enemy’s mines. The swarms of **mines** ate into each other’s numbers, but the enemy swarm had the superior numbers, and the half that survived the counter volley closed in on allied ships.

Escort squadrons were lined up on the front row of the **Woodpecker Fleet**. They were corps made up of **defense ships**, which specialized in defending the fleet against **mines**. **Defense ships** were not prime prey for **mines**, since their odds of success against them were scant, and even if they did hypothetically manage to shave off the opposing side’s anti-**mine** defenses, it would bear minimal impact on the overall battle. This was the only opportunity a **defense ship** had to take center stage.

During the initial forming of the fleet, Duhier expended every effort to scrape together four **escort squadrons** to add to the **defense ships** he’d been given, as he wanted to economize his **mines**. Now, his hard work was paying off.

The **Woodpecker Fleet’s defense ships** absorbed the enemy **mines**, letting next to none of them through.

“Enemy fleet now falling back,” reported the Information Officer.

Duhier ordered a change in formation, and the **defense ship** corps

withdrew to the rear. The other classes of warship moved ahead. The formation was now wedge-shaped, and the **recon sub-fleet Césceumec**, which was under Duhier's direct command, took that wedge's center position. The **Woodpecker Fleet** continued to advance even as it rearranged itself, albeit sluggishly. It sped up slightly after the change in formation was complete, but since they had to match speeds with massive **battle-line ships**, the pace remained relaxed.

The enemy fleet was retreating at even slower speeds, and the distance between them kept narrowing.

"All **battle-line ships**, commence full-power **mine battle**," commanded Duhier.

Now all of the **mines** the **battle-line ships** kept back were fired.

Duhier issued another command without waiting for the mines to land. "Charge!"

The **battle-line ships**, having fired all of their ammo, fell back, and the **patrol** and **assault ships** zoomed forward. **Raid ships** would have been the most useful at this stage, but sadly, the **Woodpecker Fleet** didn't have any, as it had prioritized **defense ships**.

"Enemy fleet reopening mine attack."

Small **space-time bubbles** split off from the enemy bubbles they originated from. It looked as though they'd left aside a modicum of **mines**.

"A mine counter strike. They must want to protect either their **flagship** or a ship of equal importance," said *Bhonh*. "Whatever they want to protect is estimated to be here." Part of the enemy fleet became circled by a red line. "I hereby call this group the 'enemy anomaly.'"

Duhier nodded. "So that 'anomaly' has solid defenses. In that case, let's move out of the way."

Duhier pointed at the allied ships' planned course on the **planar space map** using his **command baton**; with a flick, he made that line shift. He extracted another two **assault squadrons** and designated a special route. He would have them advance to a position where they could square off against the anomaly, which could be the flagship or a ship affiliated with it, but which could also be an elite corps sent in during this crucial phase of the battle. In fact, it could very well be both of those things. They needed to keep it in check.

Bhonh gazed at the **planar space map**, and flashed Duhier a smile that screamed *you got it, that's the correct decision*. This delighted Duhier, but the very next moment, he grew annoyed at himself for being so pleased.

"Shifting course thusly," said *Bhonh*.

"If you would," nodded Duhier.

The swarm of allied **mines** began meeting their marks, greatly

cutting down the enemy fleet and leaving their formations in disarray. Duhier had intended to ram them without changing speed or formation, but he changed his mind.

“All ships, assume **complete mobile-state**.”

The **assault ships** that until then had kept pace with the slow **patrol ships** now attacked the enemy at full speed. The **recon sub-fleet** Duhier commanded directly, the *Césceumec*, arced for the **Casehr Countdom**.

“All *Césceumec* ships, prepare for **mine battle**,” he ordered, feeling somewhat uplifted. Everything had gone according to plan. Now they just had to hope **Defense Group 103** was alive and well.

The **patrol ships** of the *Césceumec* released their **mines**, but didn’t **split** them off from their space-time bubbles. Instead the **mines** were kept inside the ships’ **bubbles**, and the **recon sub-fleet** formed a single line formation before charging for the **Casehr Portal**.

“All ships, **split off** your **mines**.”

Firing the **mines** into the **Portal** was an attack on the enemy ships lying in wait in **3-space**. And the **mines** fired this time around by the ships of the *Césceumec* had another very important role — transmitting a message to the allies that were doubtless still alive over in the **3-space** side.

In many cases, it would be arranged such that **mines** and vessels rushed into the **Portal** at the same time, but this time they were staggered. However, several **conveyance ships** did transition to **3-space** simultaneously alongside the **mines**. These conveyance ships of course carried the same message from the same **command center**, but they hadn’t the time to stick around for a reply. Their main purpose was reconnaissance — entering **3-space**, then endeavoring to get a grasp of how matters stood at the same time the message was transmitted. But they only had mere moments to remain there. The conveyance ships transitioned back to **planar space** and **space-time fused** with their mother ships’ bubbles to relay the information they’d collected.

Aboard the **flagship** *Hoïucaü*, Duhier observed the **planar space map**. Allied ships were pushing the enemy back, and no one could obstruct the **recon sub-fleet** *Césceumec*’s path.

Just then, the first recon report came in: “Allied ships alive and well.”

That meant their comrades in the **Casehr Countdom** were still giving it their all.

Excellent, thought Duhier. If there were no allied ships left to rescue this far into the battle, they’d look like absolute nonces. It was supposed, based on the enemy’s movements, that the **Star Forces** in the **Countdom of Casehr** were still putting up a fight. Duhier was just

relieved to know that supposition was on the mark.

“I’m entrusting the right of command within **planar space** to **Associate Commodore Siltach** for the time being,” announced Duhier.

Siltash was the *RoiGlaharérh Byrer Sahiarr* (Woodpecker Fleet Vice Commander-in-Chief)-cum-**Commandant** of the **assault sub-fleet Becricéic**. He’d of course been notified of the possibility that the right of command would be assigned to him in advance. As such, they could keep the **inter-bubble communication** code informing him nice and short.

Duhier considered ordering his ships not to let the anomaly near the **Portal**, but he dashed the idea as unnecessary. Siltash was a more experienced commander than him, so it seemed wiser not to do anything that might tie the man’s hands.

The vanguard plunged through the **Casehr Portal** at last, **patrol ship** after patrol ship passing over into **3-space**.

“Passing through **portal** in E-minus 15... 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, passing through.”

The **patrol ship** *Hoüicaiü* crossed dimensions.

Duhier switched his *frocragh* input source from his **circlet** to the *Hoüicaiü*’s suite of detectors. There was little sign of the enemy in the **Casehr Countdom**. It appeared the enemy had almost fully committed to a sortie into **planar space**. The few enemy ships that were left behind in **3-space** had already been crushed by the time the *Hoüicaiü* entered it.

In **3-space**, the **Casehr Portal** was located in orbit around the planet *Dobech*. And if the *Dreuécth Casairr* (Casehr Countess’s Manor) was still around, it had to be on that orbital path, too.

“Can we contact the **Manor**?” asked Duhier.

“There is no **Manor**, sir,” reported the **Exploration Staff Officer**.

This came as no surprise. The **Manor** was movable, too. It may have migrated away from that orbital path. There was also the possibility it had gotten destroyed right after allowing the enemy to invade.

“How’s the **orbital tower**?”

“In good condition, sir.”

“Good. And *Glagamh Saubyrer Borairr Ceutebaurbina* (Defense Group 103 Command)?”

“We have established contact with the *Glagac Saubyrer* (Group Flagship) *Sturoth*. The **Commandant, Associate Commodore Sotath**, is on the line,” stated the **Communications Staff Officer**.

“I’ll speak with the **Commandant**. I’m leaving combat command to **Chief of Staff Bhonh** in the meantime.”

Bhonh saluted. “Roger that.”

Duhier wouldn’t have the time to be fulfilling his duties as a

commander for the time being.

Commandant Sotath appeared on screen.

“Did you receive the message?”

“Yes. We have already begun preparing to retreat, sir.”

The message had relayed **Vice Emperor** Dubeus’ orders to abandon the **Casehr Countdom**.

“Do you have any info for me about the *Dreughéc Casairr* (Comital House of Casehr)?”

“The **Countess of Casehr** and her family are under our guardianship, sir. There have been casualties among the **servant vassals**, but most are unharmed.”

“That’s great. Where is the **Countess of Casehr**?”

“She is currently aboard this ship. Would you like to speak to her, sir?”

“Yes, but before that, I’d like to know if the *Sturoth* is all clear.”

“We’re out of **mines**, but we took no damage.”

“Got it. Now let me speak to the **Countess**.”

“Just a moment, sir.”

The screen switched over. Though the **Countess**’s hair was greyish blue, trying to guess an Abh’s age going by their appearance was pure folly. Duhier had been a toddler when he first met **Countess Casehr**, but he remembered her as looking exactly the same. The fact that she appeared to be in her early adolescence resulted either from **Comital House of Casehr** tradition, or from the personal tastes of the *Dreu Raica* (Former Count).

“**Your Highness**.” The **Countess** bowed her head. “It has been too long, and I stand ashamed that I am unable to offer you my hospitality despite your having graciously come to my **star-fief**.”

“It has been too long, **Your Excellency**. However, I’m sorry to say there’s no time to exchange pleasantries. The **Empire** has decided to abandon **Your Excellency**’s **star-fief**. Please evacuate posthaste.”

The **Countess**’s expression remained unshaken. She was perhaps prepared for this.

Though he could never say it aloud, Duhier was thankful the *Dreuécth* (Countess’s Manor) was destroyed. If it had had the gall to remain intact, the Countess and her family would still be there, and this whole process would’ve taken even longer.

The **Countess** cast down her eyes. “It’s written in stone, I take it.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Do I have time to bid my **landworld citizens** a farewell-for-now?”

“I have to talk to the **Landworld Citizen Representative** myself. On the other hand, please note that we cannot alter the actions of the **Star Forces** to accommodate your address. I hope you don’t mind.”

“**Your Highness** must speak with the **Representative**?” She looked mystified, but she soon nodded in assent: “That will be fine.” She bowed, and disappeared from the screen.

“Summon the **Landworld Citizen Representative**,” ordered Duhier.

The line was switched to the landworld government without delay, but it was not the **Representative** on the line.

The people of the **landworld** planet of Dohbesh called its **Landworld Citizen Representative** the “President,” and the one who took the call was a man who called himself “Vice President.”

“**Commander-in-Chief**, I regret to inform you the President is currently attending to something of utmost urgency.”

“No matter. I just need you to have enough authority. Right now, I’m speaking to you as the **Vice Emperor Special Envoy**.”

Either the man didn’t know Duhier was an **Imperial**, or didn’t wish to use his **title**. Duhier wondered which it was, before realizing he didn’t really need to care.

“The **Empire** will be temporarily leaving this star system.”

“I see.”

This Vice President was an even-tempered one, too, just like the Countess. He must have seen this coming. Perhaps they were negotiating with the enemy behind closed doors.

“I come bearing words from **His Highness the Vice Emperor**. He says ‘Though it truly saddens me we must part ways, it will not be a permanent separation.’”

“This turn of events has left us just as dismayed.” Though his words were cordial, they were not from the heart.

“This being the case, we are accompanying three hundred seventeen **imperial citizens** hailing from your honorable star system who wish to return home. With your permission, we will escort them down. Would that be all right?”

Now the Vice President’s expression was not so impassive. “This is the first I’ve heard of it... Furthermore, I believe this planet sent a hundred times as many people up to the Empire.”

“Not all of whom desire to return home. Moreover, we’re unable to send back all the citizens who do.”

“Is that not unfair?”

“It’s quite unfair. Unfortunately, there are limits to what we can do. Do you have something to say about that?”

“No. Please wait a moment.”

“I can’t. I have no time.” *What is there to deliberate over, anyway? We brought back your compatriots. The end.* So Duhier thought as he glanced at the screen and read out the numerals: “Please respond within 1,062 seconds’ time. If you don’t, we may not be able to return

them.”

“What will become of them if you don’t return them?”

What a stupid question. “We will return with them in tow, of course. They are **imperial citizens**, and as such are under our protection.”

“If Dohbesh takes them, will their status change?”

Duhier grew even more exasperated. “Please, sir, that’s for you and the planet to decide. While the **Empire** has no intention of stripping their imperial citizen status away from them, we do not intend to compel you to ensure they retain it, either.”

It was not uncommon for **imperial citizens** to return home after losing interest in or growing tired of life in space, and there were many such cases among people hailing from Dohbesh as well. Dohbesh could just treat them in the same manner as always. Perhaps the Vice President suspected there were ulterior motives at play. He could be worried agents mixed in with the batch of returnees would create an underground organization in service to the Empire. If that was in fact what the Vice President was thinking, then it was truly staggering. In reality, the Empire was simply more considerate than many among the land peoples believed.

“Excuse me; I will discuss this.”

“I don’t mind, but please hurry. You have 1,007 seconds left.”

The Vice President vanished from the screen. Duhier couldn’t afford to let this time go to waste. Duhier switched from his **Vice Emperor Special Envoy** to his **Commander-in-Chief** frame of mind and asked *Bhonh* how things were progressing. Not all of the **sub-fleets** had crossed over, after all. The **patrol ships** under them passed through the **Portal** one after the other. There were no enemy ships to impede them, and **Defense Group 103** had more than half of its war potential left. **Conveyance ships** made frequent round trips between dimensions, allowing both sides to transmit intelligence. “I don’t think we really need any further firepower on this side. What do you think?” asked Duhier.

“I agree.” *Bhonh* smiled her *Bhonh* smile and nodded.

“Then have the remaining ships secure the **Casehr Portal** over on the **planar space** side.”

“Roger.”

Just then, the Vice President returned on screen. “We will accept them. Please instruct us as to the specific procedure.”

“I’ll switch the line to the officer in charge of that.”

Duhier cut his talk with the Vice President there. His duties as **Vice Emperor Special Envoy** were now over with. Now he could devote his full attention to his work as **Commander-in-Chief**.

The enemy fleet had put quite some distance between itself and

Dohbesh. **The Casehr Portal** revolved around ninety-seven *saidagh* above the planet, and Duhier's fleet was lurking in orbit not far from it, while the enemy fleet was three hundred whole *saidagh* away. **Defense Group 103** was in orbit some distance below the **Casehr Portal**.

The Defense Group's main weapon was the group of **orbital strongholds**. They were maneuverable in **3-space**, but had no **planar space navigation functionality**. **Intrasystem ships** were ejected from these space strongholds, carrying personnel to **warships** that could fly through planar space. The **forts** were almost entirely unmanned now, but they were still engaged in combat, bombarding the enemy fleet with their high-power **laser cannons**. The **flagship of Defense Group 103**, the *Sturoth*, was remotely controlling them through an information link.

The enemy fleet was spraying water as a means of defense. Countless minute ice particles dispersed the light rays and dampened their intensity, an effect which manifested visually as hundreds of light beams.

Duhier gathered together his fleet and had it head for the enemy at combat velocity, with the exception of one ship that descended to Dohbesh. It was a modded, decommissioned patrol ship serving as a **supply ship**, ferrying the Dohbeshian returnees. It was also loaded with miscellaneous information, like letters and correspondence from Dohbeshians who didn't wish to return. When the **supply ship** came alongside the **orbital tower**, Duhier's fleet closed in on the enemy and was about to open fire.

"So the enemy fleet is Hanian, huh?" asked Duhier.

"Yes. All of the ships in **3-space** are Federation ships. They number about one-half **sub-fleet's** worth, with **assault ships** at the core of their formation," stated *Bhonh*.

"Assign each ship targets to shell," said Duhier. "I want to drive them out from behind that mist. Let's leave the crushing of the ships to the strongholds."

"Roger."

Less than a minute later, they received their assigned targets through their *frocragh*. The enemy ships' positions were perceivable across fourth-dimensional space-time. Their future positions were of course just predictions, and progressing the time axis caused the ships' positions in space to turn vaguer, like blurrier and blurrier dots. The projected trajectories of allies were also blurry, but one could tell which possible paths were thicker or thinner than others.

Duhier immediately confirmed this information and flicked a glance at the **control console's** screen. What he wanted to know was the accuracy rate of the **EM cannons** (the primary weapons of **patrol**

ships). In **3-space**, the firing range of **EM cannons** was infinite. They would keep on flying through space forever, unless they eventually got pulled in by some heavenly body's gravity well. However, dodging a shell fired from afar was child's play. They flew at the slow, slow speed of 0.01% the speed of light. In order to make the accuracy rate anything near effective, they needed to close the distance.

When the accuracy rate became 72/10,000:

"Commence shelling," Duhier ordered.

The order was relayed to each ship, and the **patrol ships** of the *Césceumec* began firing **nuclear fusion shells** from their **EM cannons**.

Bhonh came over and whispered: "Mightn't this be too soon?"

She was insinuating that the accuracy rate was too low, and that they were wasting ammunition.

"You're so stingy," smiled Duhier.

"You're not stingy enough, **Commander-in-Chief**."

"I'm not just squandering resources here," said a miffed Duhier. "I gave it plenty of thought."

Commodores with long decades in the **Star Forces** occasionally fired shells profusely. They were too accustomed to how freely they'd been able to use resources before the Dividing of the **Empire**. Duhier was different, though. He'd accumulated his experience after the Fall of Lahkfacar, and sadly, he knew in his bones how resource-poor they were.

"The shells have begun landing," reported the **Exploration Staff Officer**.

The 0.01% light-speed **fusion shells** pierced through the artificial fog and attacked the enemy ships hiding behind it.

There were no direct hits, but the enemy fleet had begun actively avoiding them, crawling out from behind the brume of ice.

The *Hoücaü* and the *Sturoth* sustained the **information link**, and Duhier's designs were communicated to **Associate Commodore Sotath**. At present, the two ships were over two hundred *dagh* away from each other, so there was a round-trip lag of just under two seconds, but compared to exchanging information in **planar space**, it was virtually instantaneous.

In all honesty, Duhier preferred commanding **3-space** battles.

The enemy must have gotten a sense of their plans, but they still had to abandon the defensive bulwark of mist. Hit by the unattenuated high-power beams, the enemy ships were smashed one after the other. Other ships were surrounded by a net of the nuclear fusion shells fired by **EM cannons**; with nowhere to run, they became engulfed in nuclear fire bombs detonated at point-blank range.

The enemy fleet decided to counterattack. They tried approaching within range of the **antiproton cannons**, the primary weapons of

assault ships. But that also raised the hit rate of the **Star Forces' EM cannons**. The enemy ships got caught in the **EM cannon** fire and exploded one after the other. None of the enemy ships were able to pierce the **magnetic shields** and get in close enough to deal damage to the **patrol ships' hulls**. Duhier pitied the enemy.

"We're just trying to retreat from this system. Is there some way we can get them to see that?"

"They know that if they weaken us even just a little, we'll be easier to pursue," said *Bhonh*.

"Then we'll just have to make it through without any losses. I don't imagine you're going to complain that it's squandering resources?"

"I don't tend to waste my breath like that, sir."

"Best fire all of the remaining shells, then."

The **patrol ships** fired their **EM cannons** without pause, triggering countless nuclear explosions. Dense clouds of gas arose after each blast, but they scattered and thinned out shortly thereafter. The shelling from the **forts** traced dazzling streaks across the zone of gas. The Federation **assault ships** flew back through the pillars of light.

"Apologies for the wait, **Commander-in-Chief**," said **Associate Commodore Sotath**. "We have finished taking them in."

He was referring not just to the personnel of **Defense Group 103**, but also to the crew of the **supply ship** that escorted the Dohbeshians down to the **orbital tower**. All hands had been transferred to interstellar ships, with the **supply ship** that ferried the returnees summarily discarded. They couldn't afford to wait for the returnees carrying bulky baggage to disembark.

The situation beyond the **Casehr Portal** (i.e. over in **planar space**) was being continually monitored using **conveyance ships**, among others.

"No danger at the moment," said *Bhonh*. "The **Portal** is secured."

"Then have **Defense Group 103** retreat," ordered Duhier.

The vessels of **Defense Group 103**, with the **flagship Sturoth** at their core, headed for the **Casehr Portal**. The enemy fleet hadn't the power to thwart their flight. **Defense Group 103** (which consisted of **patrol ships**, **supply ships**, and **carrycrafts**) slipped through the **Portal**.

The report came in: "All **Defense Group 103** ships have safely passed into **planar space**."

"Good. Let's follow them through," said Duhier.

He strained his *frocragh* and checked on the course of the battle. The **patrol ships** of the **recon sub-fleet Césceumec** stormed through the **Casehr Portal**. Nary a moment after the last ship crossed over, the group of **forts** orbiting the planet Dohbesh began self-destructing.

Chapter 2: The Woodpecker Fleet

The **Countdom of Casehr** was not the only star system the **Woodpecker Fleet** retreated from. It was the only one that saw combat, and it accommodated personnel and materials now that over thirty star systems would be abandoned. The majority of those systems were small-scale military bases, but some were also **domains**.

That being the case, the **Woodpecker Fleet** now contained a miscellany of ships. In addition, one **countess**, two **barons**, and five **magistrates** were hitching a ride on the **flagship** *Hoücaïi*.

During the voyage back, Duhier often invited them and their families to sup with him. It was on one such occasion that the **Countess of Casehr** asked him a question:

“What are *Fiac Roïspeunaigr* (His Highness the Vice Emperor)’s thoughts?”

“His thoughts about what?” asked Duhier.

“I would always give thanks when the **Star Forces** came. I thought they must have traveled quite some distance to provide support.”

“It’s no mistake to believe we have come to help.”

“That I do not doubt. Having said that, however, I cannot shake the suspicion it was just a side goal done while attending to some other more pressing matter.”

“What you’re insinuating is that it might have been done as part of a large-scale evacuation,” said the *Lymh Sorzenr* (Baron of *Sorzenh*). A man with hair the color of blue ice, he was the last of the **nobles** to join up with the **Woodpecker Fleet**.

“Well, yes,” said the Countess.

“Truth be told,” the **Baron of Sorzenh** told Duhier, “I was surprised when the evacuation order was issued to my domain as well. I feared perhaps the enemy had drawn that close.”

“No, the *Lymscorh Sorzenr* was safe.”

“Then why?”

All the **nobles** dining at the table gazed Duhier’s way.

“I’m sure my father in Sescarr has an explanation,” said Duhier, in an attempt to squash the subject.

Much to Duhier’s chagrin, however, it appeared the **nobles** had no intention of straying from it.

“Might *Fiac Dubeuser* be planning to abdicate the **vice**

emperorship?" asked the **Baron of Sorzenh**.

"Goodness..." The **Countess of Casehr** and the rest of the **nobles** kept staring at Duhier.

"No. Or at least, I've heard no such thing from my father," Duhier hastened to reply.

"Oh, that's a shame. I thought I might be able to get you to invite me to the enthronement ceremony of *Fiac Roispeunaigr nata* (His Highness the new Vice Emperor)." The **Countess of Casehr** cracked a smile, but then she tilted her head with curiosity. "Ah, would there even be an enthronement ceremony for that occasion?"

"When my father assumed the position, there was no particularly bombastic ceremony for it," said Duhier, elated that the topic had shifted. "In fact, my house is known for disliking ceremonies in general."

"**Your Highness's** house being the **Royal House of Clyoov**, if I'm correct?" said the **Baron of Sorzenh**.

"That's correct. And there probably won't be a ceremony even in the event the **vice emperorship** is passed down. Considering the situation, I don't think a celebratory banquet would be in good taste."

"I say that it's precisely during times like these that a little color is necessary," said the Countess. "My one regret is how austere I went about the **landworld citizen** farewell. A sorrowful-parting song was made and everything, too."

"Would you have sung that song, **Countess**?"

"No. I had a contract with a singer from Dohbesh. The plan was to have him sing it."

"So what happened to that singer?"

"He went back home, naturally. I wonder whether I'll ever hear his sweet voice again." The **Countess** stared at Duhier.

Duhier was tempted to say *I'm sure you will*, but Abliars were not allowed to make such irresponsible remarks.

"I hope you get to reunite with your dear **landworld citizens**," said Duhier. He was sure he could get away with saying that much. At the very least, he wasn't lying. He truly hoped for the **Countdom of Casehr's** restoration.

Duhier tried to steer the discussion to the topic of singing, but the **Baron of Sorzenh** mercilessly ended the digression: "Ah, *Fiac, Lonh*, accept my utmost apologies for my rudeness, but that's not what I was trying to inquire into."

"Then what is it you would like to know?" replied Duhier politely, though he was sick to the back teeth.

"My worry is that the position of **Vice Emperor** will disappear altogether."

At this, the **Countess of Casehr** knitted her brows. "Don't tell me

you foresee us surrendering, Lonh-Lymr.”

“No, of course not. The thought never crossed my mind. *Fiac Roispeunaigr* is not a *Biboth* but an *Abliar*, after all. He would never do something so absurd, no matter the circumstances.”

“My, *Lonh*. How *audacious* of you to compare **the Imperial Family** to the *Biboth* Clan.”

Duhier gave the **Countess of Casehr** a small nod of gratitude for gently chiding him.

“Forgive my impropriety. In any case, surrender is out of the question.”

The **nobles** concurred.

Next, a question from another **noble**, the *Lymh Nurizor* (Baron of *Nurizoc*): “So what did you mean, *Lonh*? What’s this about the **vice emperorship** disappearing?”

“I mean the potential abandonment of maintaining the **Empire** as it stands.”

“Could you be more specific?”

“I’m entertaining the notion that the territories become drastically reduced and the rest is temporarily left in enemy hands.”

The **Baron of Sorzenh**’s conjecture was unfortunately correct. Duhier had heard about his father’s plan of action following his previous mission, when he was dispatched as the **Vice Emperor Special Envoy** to the *Dreuhynh Cfatr* (Countdom of *Cfath*), whose **landworld** (*Setsilynec*)’s **administration** declared secession from the **Empire**. No contact could be made with the *Dreu Cfatr*. It wasn’t even clear whether *Cfath*’s **Liege** was active over in **Area 1** or just dead. The Countdom was governed by a **magistrate**, but the **citizens** of *Setsilynec* had caught wind of their **Liege**’s absence. It seemed they’d gathered information the best they could and concluded that nothing was to be gained from remaining in the Empire. Which wasn’t, in Duhier’s eyes, cause to be that quick to secede, but he figured they must have their reasons. Needless to say, Duhier’s task was to persuade them to stay within the Empire’s economic sphere and keep sending their sons and daughters to the **Star Forces** as well as to other organs of the Empire. As usual, an official with expertise was made “Vice Envoy,” and an official from *Setsilynec* accompanied them too. Naturally, Duhier relied on their great acumen.

Yet their efforts went in vain. Though they were welcomed there by the **Magistrate**, the **landworld administration** was decidedly colder. While they didn’t go so far as to turn down negotiations, nothing came of them apart from an agreement to continue negotiations. The Vice Envoy was given full authority regarding those negotiations. Duhier had had no choice but to leave a single **carrycraft** for the **Magistrate** and the officials who stayed behind,

and pull out with nothing to show for it.

The day after Duhier returned to the **Sescarr Viscountdom** and reported the disappointing news back to his father, Duhier was informed of their policy going forward. **Area 2** would deliberately cut back on their holdings and essentially cloister themselves away until contact with **Area 1** was reestablished.

As a matter of fact, the industrial power keeping the **Area 2 Fleet** aloft was already concentrated in the **Sescarr Viscountdom**. It had enough resources, and could be self-sufficient for millennia.

His father didn't outright say it, but Duhier worried the failed negotiations with the *Setsilynec* **landworld administration** was the nail in the coffin. At the same time, Duhier also thought giving up on maintaining the Empire's current dominion was probably the best course of action. While it had already been encroached upon quite a bit, **Area 2** was still too vast for their current force of arms to protect, and winning was a pipe dream. By gathering the fleet in one place and focusing on defense, they could keep the fighting going for the longest possible span of time.

Though the fact they were ultimately leaving it all up to **Area 1** was an upsetting one, they had no other choice.

Duhier kept mum about all of it. As of now, only a handful of high-ranking officials and officers had been told. And while Duhier was apparently one of that select few, the **nobles** seated around the dining table were not.

"I wish I knew, but I'm afraid I don't," smiled Duhier.

The **nobles** could tell he was lying, but they could also tell he was forced to lie.

"Hmm, I see. So then, shall we enjoy, amongst ourselves, a debate based on nothing concrete?" asked the **Baron of Sorzenh**.

"I don't see why not," nodded the **Countess of Casehr**. "Though to be honest, I can't think of a way to attack your position, *Lonh-Lymr*. Right now, I'm just interested in *where* we would be secluding ourselves."

"I can't imagine where it would be besides the **Sescarr Viscountdom**. I'm sure you agree, *Fiac*?"

"My father always states he will defend the **Sescarr Viscountdom** to the death, so if, hypothetically speaking, we were to choose a single place, there would be no reason to choose anywhere besides Sescarr." Duhier reckoned he was allowed to say that much.

"So it really would be Sescarr..." The **Countess of Casehr's** expression turned dark.

"Oh dear, not thrilled with a stay in Sescarr?" asked the **Baron of Nurizoc**. "Not that I don't understand feeling restless residing in another person's **star-fief**..."

“**Landworld citizens** don’t live there.”

The **Baron of Nurizoc** emitted an amazed little rasp of breath. “I suppose **grandees** perceive things differently from us.” “Grandee” was the word for particularly high-ranking nobles who possessed inhabited planets. Abh society generally considered it odd to express admiration for land peoples.

“You misunderstand,” said the **Countess**. “I simply fear there might be no more new **imperial citizens**.”

Baron Nurizoc rubbed his chin. “Hrm... well, if you ask me, that isn’t something to fret over too much. The military doesn’t need that many Landers to begin with. Don’t get me wrong, our ships’ survival rates are higher when **NCCs** are aboard, but if you look at it from a different angle, that’s *all* their presence does. When it comes to pure piloting and combat, **starpilots** alone ought to be sufficient.”

“My, Baron, you’re a brave soul,” chuckled the **Countess**.

Baron Nurizoc appeared a bit huffy. “I’m not making light of the survival rates of individual ships. Far from it. We must, however, look at the overall picture. Instead of repeatedly engaging in reckless battles to protect the multitude of **landworlds**, we should decrease ship losses by narrowing down the number of places we are to protect. In so doing, even more **starpilot** lives would be saved, compared to fighting alongside **NCCs**. Unfortunately, I don’t know the numbers offhand to be making quantitative arguments here and now, but given that **His Highness the Vice Emperor** is of the same mind, would it be a stretch to assume he has decided to abandon all the **NCC** wellsprings — that is, **landworlds**, for the time being?”

The **Countess** nodded. “I don’t know whether *Fiac Roïspeunaigr* is of the same mind, but I don’t doubt **Your Excellency** makes a good point. Yet without **imperial citizens**, no new family lineages can arise.”

Baron Nurizoc looked at her blankly. “What would be so sad about that? It’s true that some **imperial citizens** are promoted to Abh **gentry**. Such is the **Empire’s** spirit of charity. Or perhaps, the prize it awards those who have contributed to it. It makes eminent sense. But isn’t accepting **imperial citizens** in order to thus recompense them putting the cart before the horse?”

“You are mistaken, *Lonh*,” said **Countess Casehr**. “They are, as it were, Abhs in the making. Sure, more than a few may not desire to become Abhs, but it is through the provision of new Abh lines from a diverse array of **landworlds** that the Empire’s dynamism and vitality are maintained.”

Baron Nurizoc wore an awkward and embarrassed expression. His **surname** was *Ŭémh*, which signified he was related by blood to the Abh progenitors, the **Riders of the Dawn**, the initial “bio-droids”

created in the long-gone mother city. The **surnym** of **Countess Casehr**, meanwhile, was *Ssynec*, signifying the descendants of those who obtained a **noble rank** after graduating from **landworld citizen** to **imperial citizen** to **gentry**.

Duhier suddenly remembered the **landworlder Count**. The man had been quite close to Duhier's sister. He wondered whether that was still the case now. Were they even still alive, for that matter?

"Well said," said **Baron Sorzenh**. "And that's another reason I posited *Fiac Roispeunaigr* might intend to abdicate his position. I believe he may well wish to give his duties as the **Area 2 Fleet Commander-in-Chief** his undivided attention. Until now, **His Highness** has preserved the **Empire**, albeit only a portion of it. As a consequence, he has also shouldered the duty of assimilating land peoples up to the stars. Were he to refrain from ruling over a portion of the Empire, however, he would then be freed from that obligation as well."

"Dear me," said **Countess Casehr**. "You don't think Sescarr will be maintained as 'a portion of the Empire'?"

"That's not unthinkable, but wouldn't deeming a single star system as half of the **Empire** be much too sorrowful?"

"Who's to say it will only be a single star system?"

"Even if it ends up being ten or so systems, my sentiment remains the same."

"Then what position will we be left in? What happens if we stop being part of the Empire?"

"Isn't it obvious? We will be in effect an isolated nation surrounded by hostile powers."

No one had a rebuttal for **Baron Sorzenh**'s supposition.

Duhier didn't know whether his father would stop being **Vice Emperor**, and he had to wonder: even if he did continue to go by that title, would it eventually become pro forma?

"I must say, though," said **Baron Nurizoc**, "it must be paining *Fiac Roispeunaigr* and *Fiac Glaharérr* a great deal."

"It certainly is," said Duhier, nodding. "And I must presume the present situation is paining not just us two, but all Abhkind," he pointed out calmly.

"Yes, but I say that because the **Royal House of Clyoov** is now forced to entrust its fate to **His Majesty** — a man from the **Royal House of Barkeh**, of all houses."

"Ah, I see. You're operating under a misunderstanding, *Lonh-Lymr*," Duhier smiled. "I too have heard the rumor that the **Royal Houses of Clyoov** and **Barkeh** are at odds. But I assure you it is counterfactual. When I was a young child, *Dusanh Érumitta* treated me kindly."

“My deepest apologies.” **Baron Nurizoc** bowed his head, but by the looks of him, he didn’t really believe what Duhier said.

Yet it was true. Duhier harbored neither the **Royal House of Barkeh** nor *Dusanh* any ill will. The only conflict that was (secretly) weighing on his mind lay in Sescarr, and that was the antagonism between his father and **Star Forces Admiral** Cohtponee, who, it seemed, was hyper-critical of his passive approach. Duhier was sure she’d call voluntarily abandoning the territories the height of madness. There were even rumors she once made quite the disturbing remark, along the lines of: “Maybe it was a mistake to follow him just because he’s an **Imperial**.” Though that was very difficult to believe. What couldn’t be denied was how often she admonished the **Vice Emperor**.

Duhier, for his part, agreed with his father. The fate of the **Empire** was to be entrusted to **Area 1**. No matter how hard the **Area 2 Fleet** fought, it wouldn’t have much bearing on the overall war.

Neither Dubeus nor Cohtponee were power players in the chess game of history... let alone Duhier.

Chapter 3: The *Glaharérh Byrer Claiïar* (Training Fleet Commander-in-Chief)

Abliarsec Néic Dubreuscr Bærh Parhynr Lamhirh regarded herself as a power player in the chess game of history.

With regard to the **Empire's** fate, she ascribed to neither the optimistic nor the pessimistic views. She had no interest in trying to predict the future, for she must blaze a bright future with her own two hands — and she now had the power to do so.

The position of “**Crown Princess**” was nothing to sneeze at within the Empire, and to call the Empire the lead player of the age was no exaggeration. In addition to being the **Crown Princess**, she held the **military rank** of **Imperial Admiral** and had been entrusted with the duties of the **Training Fleet Commander-in-Chief** as well.

The **Training Fleet** was, at present, the largest force in the **Humankind Empire of Abh's Star Forces**. Back when the sun named Abliar shone at the Empire's center, the **Training Fleet** was a collection of newly constructed ships. It was a **fleet** where crews practiced how to handle the new ships they were put in charge of. The ships born in **construction sites** would come under the **Training Fleet** before proceeding to their eventual posts. Nevertheless, the 28th **Emperor, Dusanh**, who acceded to the throne on the heels of the Fall of the **Capital**, expanded the **Training Fleet's** role. He tasked them with the role of the **starpilot academies** that educated **Star Forces** management. The residential sections of the **starpilot academies** were furnished with motive power and **space-time bubble generators** since before they left Lahkfacar, which was to say they were actively used as **interstellar ships** during the great emergency, as the **trainee pupils** were the first ones who had to unfortunately be evacuated when the Fall of the Capital was at hand.

Byrec Casna Claiïar (Training Fleet 1) was formed around the mobile residential quarters for trainees. Since the lectures held at the academy had to be conducted aboard ship and the number of trainees increased, **passenger ships** were added. However, there was no time or resources to manufacture new passenger ships, and so they were created via modifying older-model **battle-line** and **supply ships**. The original mobile residential quarters were also armed for self-defense.

Residential ships weren't the only ones that belonged to **Fleet 1**. Warships were also needed for training exercises, and the force of arms required to guard and escort was even more important. The future **Star Forces starpilots** in **Training Fleet 1** were the hope of the Empire, which could not afford to lose them. Therefore, though the **Fleet 1** escort corps was small, it was of a high caliber. They could be safely called the most elite corps the **Imperial Star Forces** could reasonably expect at present.

Fleet 1's scope and role were in the process of expanding. Right after it was founded, only trainees and teaching staff had lived in **Fleet 1's** residential quarters, but nowadays, kids awaiting their enrollment were also embarked. Moreover, enrollment was initially reserved for boys and girls in the offing, but the age limit was gradually decreased, until even toddlers were allowed to be aboard (though of course not without guardianship). Owing to that, the fleet was referred to by another name among the gossip — the *Byrec Sodmronr* (Nursery Fleet).

When Lafier first learned of that, she was depressed. *Am I some kind of nursery school principal?*

Of course, she never took command of **Fleet 1** directly. That was **Star Forces Admiral Cic Bau ترامسائر Atraconn**, the *Laicerec Gamubr* (Duchess of *Gamubh*). Though she didn't have very much experience on the frontlines, she had exhibited her acumen fighting at the rear for many years, and she was a skilled **soldier** with great personal magnetism.

The position of **Training Fleet 1 Commander-in-Chief** was probably too major for the still-young Lafier.

Star Forces Admiral Cic was under the command of the **Training Fleet Commander-in-Chief**, but that was mostly pro forma. Lafier's job was to receive reports and to field the requests that occasionally came her way.

Fleet 2 was the fleet that inherited the mission the **Training Fleet** had before the Fall of the Capital — it managed newly constructed ships before they got assigned to other corps. The *Glagamh Byrer Claiïar* (Training Fleet Command) was once located in the **Imperial Palace** in Lahkfacar. Back then, all of the **construction sites** that manufactured vessels of war revolved around the sun of Abliar just like the Imperial Palace. This made it convenient for receiving new ships. However, now that the **Abliar Countdom** had fallen into enemy hands, the **construction sites** had been redeployed to the territories that were still left to the Empire. For example, one of the Five Great **Construction Sites**, the **Behtoor Site**, was now in a star system called the *Zobairh Rimsezer* (*Rimsezec Harbor*), along with *Glagamh Byrer Mata Claiïar* (Training Fleet 2 Command). Each of the other star

systems that housed **construction sites** also housed *glagamh fecá Byrer Mata* (Fleet 2 secondary command centers). It was **Fleet 2's** role to manage and defend these **construction sites**, which was another duty that did not used to be laid upon the **Training Fleet**.

Just as **Training Fleet 1** was called the Nursery Fleet, **Fleet 2** was nicknamed the *Byrec Locrr* (Construction Fleet). **Fleet 1** fostered people, while **Fleet 2** produced the ships. **Fleet 2's Commander-in-Chief** was not a **Flight Branch starpilot**, but *Spénec Fazér* (Engineering Admiral) and **Imperial Baron Smitec Baurgh Gyr Sach**. He was the only **landworlder Commander-in-Chief** in all of the **Star Forces**.

The new ships that completed their drills in **Fleet 2** were sent to *Byrec Bina Claiïar* (Training Fleet 3) and then inducted into their corps. It was here they trained in exercises at the **squadron** and **sub-fleet** formation scales and higher, preparing for actual service in so doing.

After completing a series of training exercises, most corps were prepared to fly into combat at any time. Just as the **Training Fleet** was the largest corps in the **Star Forces**, **Training Fleet 3** could be called the largest operational battle corps in the **Star Forces**. It was commanded directly by the **Training Fleet Commander-in-Chief** — which is to say, by Lafier.

Lafier oftentimes found herself thinking: *Maybe this fleet exists to train me*. She did think of herself as a pretty excellent **starpilot**, but she knew that had it been peacetime, there was no way she'd be anywhere near the rank of **Imperial Admiral**. She'd probably be a **Hecto-Commander** at best. During wartime, promotion tracks were sped up for everyone, not just **Imperials**, but even so, by all rights she should be at the **Associate Commodore** level at the highest (which would give her a **sub-fleet** to command). Had it not been for the extraordinary predicament presented by the Fall of the Capital, Lafier would not be commanding such a giant fleet. That notwithstanding, she was still the **Crown Princess** — the next **Empress**.

Of course, that status was provisional in nature. The **Countdom of Abliar**, where the **imperial capital** of Lahkfacar was located, also bore the role of joining the **Eight Monarchies** of the **Empire**. The eight **portals** in that star system each led to a different region via **planar space**. Now that the **Abliar Countdom** was lost, the **Star Forces** could not make use of those eight portals, and the Empire became divided.

The four **monarchies** under the **Emperor's** dominion were Raseess, Barkeh, Wesco, and Syoorgzedeh. The remaining four monarchies, Skeer, Ileesh, Bargzedeh, and Clyoov, could not be reached or contacted. They were collectively named the *Dacuruc*

Frybarer Bodrupeca (Half of the Empire to Recover). The half that the **Emperor** did reign over was simply called the *Dacuruc Frybarer* (Empire Half).

It was hoped these four unreachable monarchies also had surviving **Imperials**, including Lafier's father, Dubeus the **King of Clyoov**. **Imperials** in her age group, such as her little brother Duhier, were probably still there as well. There could be no doubt they were being tempered by even thornier circumstances.

If the Empire's state of segmentation was resolved and **Imperials** worthier of being the **Crown Heir** appeared, Lafier would have to yield her position. Barring some scandal, she would not be stripped of her **Imperial Admiral rank**, but she would still be given a post that was more fit for a **commodore** or **grand commodore**.

There was another possibility as well. Lafier was currently at the age where she was supposed to compete to be named **Crown Heir**. And though she was currently at the forefront, that didn't mean she'd actually gotten there yet. If someone else who was worthy to be the next **Emperor** appeared in her age group, or even in the generation after her, then Lafier would naturally fight as a **soldier** under the new **Crown Heir**. If that did come to pass, though it would shame her immensely, she would understand. Preserving the Empire was an uncertain prospect at the best of times. The Empire could not persist while led by an incompetent **Emperor**. Compared to the Empire, her personal self-esteem was utterly worthless, whether she was an Abliar or not.

In short, Lafier basically needed to perform admirably enough to be seen as worthy of the **Jade Throne**. At the very least, she could safeguard her pride. And she rather hoped she could preserve the Empire in the doing. She'd hate for her name to go down in history as the last **emperor** of the **Humankind Empire of Abh**.

In an office in the *Glagac Byrer Bina* (Training Fleet Flagship) *Clybnochec*, Lafier shut herself in alone, doing her work while riding that meandering train of thought.

"**Commander-in-Chief**," came a reproachful voice.

It was her **Adjutant**, *Linn Ssynec Raucr Ghintec*, the **Count of Hyde**. The **Quartermaster Kilo-Commander's** head was peering from a virtual window-screen.

"What?" asked Lafier.

"If I could receive your approval, I would be most pleased, *Glaharérh*." The phrasing was polite, but his tone was dripping with irritation.

"I'm working on it." But then she realized she *had* been rather absorbed in her thoughts.

"Is that so?" Doubt tinged his eyes. "Because it looks to me as

though the workflow has hit a pause.”

“I’m thinking. Are you saying I don’t have the right to say no? Are you telling me to approve of everything without reading?”

“Oh no, not at all. Now that I have once again been made aware of how earnestly you are undertaking this, I reflect upon the joys of serving as your **Adjutant**.” A smile curved Jint’s lips. Then he quietly added: “I’ve got a lot on my plate, so please Lafier, get it done quick.”

“Shut up, Jint.”

There was no need for concern that this conversation would be listened in on. This back-and-forth was theirs alone.

“I’ll zip it, but only if you do that work for me.”

From where Jint was, he wasn’t actually able to see Lafier, but he knew how work was progressing, and so he must have concluded she was slacking off.

Jint’s **Adjutant** position involved serving as an aide to the **Commander-in-Chief**’s general affairs. He was, in so many words, her private secretary. His most important duty was managing her daily agenda. Of course, her own will counted more than anything when it came to how the **Commander-in-Chief** would spend her time, and the **Chief of Staff**’s requests were the next most important. Her **Adjutant** merely managed what time she had left over.

That being said, the majority of **Commanders-in-Chief** did mostly as their aides decided, barring some state of emergency, and Lafier was no exception. Initially, after assuming her post, she would, in her enthusiasm, make plans, but before long she quit doing so.

As of late, Lafier’s mornings started with her approving of the schedule Jint prepared for her. Then she would complete the items on that list, be notified of what time she had to get up the next day, and tuck herself in. Her wake-up time was usually set for eight o’clock by ship’s time, but sometimes it changed due to her schedule having been too full, among other reasons.

At times, she felt like a kitten getting carried in its mother’s mouth by the scruff. And the mama cat carrying her was, of course, Jint. Mama Cat was always pestering her that it was time to move to this place or that place. Alas, an actual kitten could just curl up to sleep once it was plopped somewhere. Unfortunately for Lafier, she always had things to carry out wherever she found herself.

Lafier scanned the text displaying on the virtual window-screen. The document was asking her permission for the transfer of supplies and the concomitant budget implementation. According to Jint’s annotations, this matter wasn’t a problem, and it was of little importance.

Lafier trusted Jint as her **Adjutant**. If he said it wasn’t a problem, then it wasn’t. Naturally, her sense of responsibility compelled her to

read everything. Yet as might be expected, she found nothing she really needed to deliberate over.

“Approved,” nodded Lafier.

Right at that moment, her body was scanned so as to confirm it was the **Training Fleet Commander-in-Chief** sitting there. Then she drew her personal **handstamp** in the air with her finger, and that too was scanned. Through that twin-step authentication, the **compucrystals** verified it was truly the **Commander-in-Chief** who’d given her sanction. Then the information was relayed to the related departments through the **compucrystal network**.

It was the **handstamp**’s fault the *Glaharérh* was forced to perform her duties by her lonesome. There were two types of **handstamp**: the type that was written on a flat surface, and the type that was drawn into the air. The flat surface type was public knowledge, and the higher the signatory’s status, the more famous their **handstamp**. Yet the chance to use flat surface handstamps seldom came up in everyday life. They were formal in nature, and not practical.

It was the air drawing type that was used on an everyday basis, and they were not to be revealed to strangers. Even parents and children had to conceal their handstamps from each other. They were **compucrystal**-recorded under multiple layers of protection, and the compucrystals referred to that recording when necessary. That was why officials of high rank were asked to do this work where no one could see them.

However, just because a close eye was being kept on the flow of work didn’t put her at ease. In fact, it was more stressful than not. It felt like her spirit was getting whittled away, bit by bit.

When she was about to deal with yet another item on her agenda, a light turned on — somebody besides Jint wanted to speak with her. There were only a select number of people who could talk to her while she was working without going through Jint first, of course, and that number was one. This could only be the **Chief of Staff**.

Lafier accepted the call, and a window-screen opened.

“*Glaharérh*,” said **Chief of Staff Commodore** Sobash through the window. “We will be at the *Saudec Éüdor* (*Éüdoc* Portal) shortly. Could you come to the **bridge**?”

“I’m coming,” she replied without pause.

Another window-screen. It was Jint again. Lafier felt low-key annoyed; Jint hadn’t done the call-waiting request first. Not that her **Adjutant** technically needed to, but it was still a bit rude, wasn’t it?

“I will call you one minute before we are scheduled to pass through,” he said. It wasn’t clear whether he’d picked up on her irritation. What Mama Cat was really saying was “you can stay there and keep working in the meantime.”

“No, I’m coming now,” she insisted.

“Then the rest of the agenda items will be left for later.”

“Make it so.” Lafier found herself nodding.

“I believe you will need to allot time for sleep, but...”

“I know that.”

“Incidentally, *Glaharérh*, your personal time today currently stands at seven hours, forty-seven minutes,” stated Jint. “If you figure sleep time into that, then of course that chips it down even more. According to the estimations—”

“In that case,” Lafier interrupted, “you had best refrain from taking any more of my sleep time with your pointless blather.”

“Apologies, ma’am.”

“Never mind that. I’d like to prepare for when we’re in **3-space**.”

“The preparations are in order.”

She could practically read Jint’s mind: *What, you don’t trust me, Lafier?* She was sure that if Sobash weren’t present, he’d outright say it.

“It’s just for caution’s sake.”

“I understand.”

The lights turned on, and the door opened. Right outside the door lay the **Commander’s Bridge**.

“*Fiac Glaharér*,” said the **guard NCC**, announcing Lafier’s arrival.

The **staff officers** at the **bridge** stood up and saluted. Lafier saluted back. Only one person there remained seated, a woman. But it wasn’t solely the fact that she alone was sitting while the **Crown Princess** was standing that made her stand out. She wasn’t wearing a **military uniform**, either.

After returning the **bridge’s** salute, Lafier walked up to her and bowed her head. “**Your Eminence**.”

The woman had an exquisite **circlet** over her verdigris-colored hair, and pointy **Abliar ears** poked out from said hair. She was the *Fanigac Glagamr Byrer Claiïar* (Abdicant Empress of Training Fleet Command) and the *Larth Üescor* (Queen of Wesco), *Abliarsec Néic Düairr Lamlonh*.

Her presence was one of the reasons Lafier felt like she was still doing on-the-job training. In the past, the idea of an **abdican emperor or empress** traveling together with a fleet was unheard of. It would be one thing if she were just hitching a ride. She was given a seat in the **command center** and everything. This was yet another sign the **Empire** was in an unusual position.

Both *Lamlonh* and the man who assigned her to **Training Fleet Command**, *Emperor Dusanh*, were Abliars — natural-born **soldiers**, just like their ancestors before them. They understood the folly of

appointing two *Glaharérh* to a fleet.

Consequently, the *Fanigac Glagamr* (Command Abdicant) didn't intrude when it came to minutiae. That said, she was always examining everything. She could freely peruse the fleet's most classified documents. And if she ever found something the young *Glaharérh* did to reach excessive levels of foolishness, she would exercise her authority to revoke the right of command from Lafier and confer it to someone more fitting. One could only imagine *Lamlonh* would find herself to be the top candidate for acting in the **Commander-in-Chief's** stead.

"Thank you for having me here, *Fiac*." *Lamlonh* bowed her head slightly.

Lamlonh never voiced anything close to critical of Lafier's actions, but she possessed the special ability to convey her appraisal of Lafier by the way she pronounced the word "*Fiac*."

What others thought of Lafier didn't much concern her, but it was a different story when it came to how an **abdicant** thought of her. She very much cared whether her performance could win her the favor of the arch-elders of the Abliar Clan. Now that there were so few **Imperials** around compared to before, her obligation to aim for the **emperorship** was more serious than ever.

It appeared that the **Abdicant's** appraisal of the **Crown Princess** today was neutral. Lafier was relieved for the time being, and she took the **Commander's Seat**.

"537 seconds until frontmost ship passes through the **Éüdoc Portal**," reported the **Navigation Staff Officer, Vice Hecto-Commander Gnomboch**.

Gnomboch's rank was relatively high, but not long had passed since he took up his **staff officer** post. In reality, he was learning the ropes of being a staff officer, but he had gained a great deal of trust fighting under Lafier since his **Linewing Starpilot** days — or so *Gnomboch* liked to believe.

Lafier wasn't of any mind to deny *Gnomboch* his pride. She was thankful she had the young comrade-in-arms by her side.

"Okay," Lafier nodded.

It was quiet. There wasn't much that could be done in **Fleet Command** during that point in time. The order the ships would plunge through the **Portal** was predetermined and relayed to all the ships under her beforehand.

Yet the air in the **command center** was so tense it could be cut with a knife. Beyond the **Éüdoc Portal**, in the *Lymscorh Éüdor*, lay the **Imperial Seatship Gaftnochec**. That was where Lafier was scheduled to be granted an audience with **Emperor Dusanh**.

Lafier pulled up a bunch of documents in the space in front of her

seat. It was Jint who compiled those files, and Jint was standing beside her.

Jint must not have been at the **bridge** for very long. Her **Adjutant** was permanently stationed in a room that led to the **Commander's Bridge** to make it convenient for him to receive visitors and callers. It was also his job to prevent ruffians from invading the Commander's Bridge. Of course, an incident like that had most recently happened three hundred and seventy years ago, so no one was seriously concerned about that. If Lafier had really spared security any thought, she would have chosen someone else to be her Adjutant. It was difficult to imagine Jint could hold back a posse of hoodlums, after all.

The documents before her eyes contained everything she needed to know for the occasion. None of it was news to her, though. It was simply written down in case she forgot something.

Also enumerated were the things she should report to the throne during her audience. They were originally chosen via her own directions, so there was no need to reexamine them. Besides, the whole conversing through an official audience thing was ceremonial. Even if Lafier did forget to mention something, that information would get transmitted to Central regardless. The reason the **Emperor** and **Crown Princess** ever brought something up was to let the other party know it was important. One was justified in calling it silly, but in the Empire, even these kinds of things were differentiated by ranking order.

The Abh liked the chaos and uncertainty that the diversity of **landworlds** sparked. In the past, there were frequent calls to homogenize the various worlds under Empire control, but that was commonly seen as a truly eccentric opinion. It was at times even deemed ghoulish. Yet at the same time, the opinion that a robust social order was necessary to bring together these chaotic worlds prevailed, and those that doubted that were a rarity. That was especially so during such strange times as these. It was considered absolutely necessary to rank people, organizations, and all manner of things for the purpose of establishing an orderly system.

Lafier had never doubted the need for order. However, it was also a fact that it felt quite rigid in recent years. Each time she climbed a long flight of stairs, she felt as though the stairs grew narrower and the flights took her a shorter amount of the way to the ceiling.

Ignoring her **Adjutant's** counsel to work in her office and doing some other work on the **bridge** was the extent of how much she could buck the system. And even then, she would have to sacrifice her sleep time in exchange.

This was the time she'd obtained for herself through her little rebellion. She scanned the documents in order to apply that time

effectively, but she didn't find anything that gave her pause. Jint was as excellent an **adjutant** as ever.

"Ten seconds before the frontmost ship passes through the **Éüdoc Portal**," reported *Gnomboch*. "...Five, four, three, two, one, passing through."

The **patrol ship** at the front of the pack, the *Moicaïi*, rushed into the **Portal** alongside a **conveyance ship**. A few seconds later, the **conveyance ship** alone returned to **planar space**.

"Safety confirmed," stated *Gnomboch*. "I will instruct the **Ship Commander** of the *Clybnochec* to pass through the **Éüdoc Portal**."

The fleet's actions were left up to the **navigation staff officers** when all was clear, so the *Glaharérh* didn't meddle. The **bridge personnel** didn't ask for Lafier's permission or orders; they simply went about their work without fuss.

"This just in from the *Clybnochec* **bridge**: time passing through **Éüdoc Portal** estimated at 14:21:43 by ship's time."

They had about five minutes to go.

The *Clybnochec* was categorized as a **patrol ship**, but it lacked a patrol ship's claws and fangs — the **EM cannons** and **mobile space-time mines**. The space normally occupied by those weapons was instead used for **Fleet Command** and dwellings for its personnel. Of course, Lafier also had a residence aboard ship.

In advance of the *Clybnochec* crossing into **3-space**, two **patrol ships** rushed into the **Éüdoc Portal**. Lafier switched modes for her *frocragh*. Now information was flowing from the *Clybnochec*'s detectors straight into her *froch*, informing her of the state of affairs in the ship's vicinity.

"Passing through the **Éüdoc Portal** in ten," said *Gnomboch*. "...Five, four, three, two, one, passing through as scheduled."

The inner surface of the compressed bubble that she saw through her *frocragh* popped, and in an instant, she was perceiving the *Lymscorh Éüdor*. An immaterial, phosphorescent sphere, the **Éüdoc Portal** was orbiting a giant gas planet. The *Bærécth Éüdor* (**Éüdoc Viscount's Manor**) was on the same orbit. Around the star named **Éüdoc**, there were several antimatter fuel factories set up by the *Bæriéc* (**Viscomital House**). However, the facilities of the *Bærécth* didn't really stand out.

A huge fleet was moored over the gas planet, and it would be a tall order to find the *Bærécth* without conducting a space probe. Even around the star, the factories of the **Viscomital House** were buried inside a **mobile antimatter fuel factory** brought in from the outside.

The **Commander's Bridge** grew increasingly hectic.

The fleet emerged one ship after the other into **3-space**. **Portals** appeared as swirls in **planar space** and as spheres in **3-space**. There

could be no foreknowledge as to where on that sphere or line, after passing through a **portal**, one would appear. This was not a fault of the technology, but rather an uncertainty principle imposed by the cosmos. Therefore, fleets that entered a **portal** in ordered formations could not help but be in disarray upon crossing over.

Fleet Command was tasked with the important mission of reorganizing the ships into tight formations. As this happened without fail every time, it was now unlikely that a collision or other unsightly accident would occur, but even so, small issues cropped up here and there. And it was important not to forget that what Lafier commanded was a *Training Fleet*. Commanders of all levels and their staff officers were struggling strenuously every day to become proficient at the things they needed to carry out. The **navigation officers** and their subordinates would be overwhelmed by the complex work ahead of them for a while.

“*Glaharérh*,” said the **Communications Staff Officer**, “an **information link** has been established with the *Rüébëic Hoca* (Mobile Imperial Palace). The time lag is 2.4 seconds.”

“I’d like to inform **His Majesty** of our arrival myself. Is it possible?” asked Lafier.

“Yes, ma’am. It appears His Majesty is already waiting.”

“Oho.” *Lamlonh*’s voice was a bit too loud to be taken as muttering. “**His Majesty** must have quite some time on his hands. I’m green with envy.”

Everyone at the bridge pretended not to hear this remark.

Lafier stood up and gazed at the main screen. “Now then, I will offer up words of greeting.”

“Just a moment, ma’am,” said the **Communications Officer**. “He will grace us shortly.”

The 28th **Emperor** appeared on the main screen.

“*Érumitonn* (Your Majesty).” Lafier bowed deeply. “The **Viscountess of Parhyñh** Lafier and the **Training Fleet 3** currently under her command humbly call upon Your Majesty.”

Dusanh wasn’t able to see anyone but Lafier; both the staff officers busy settling fleet affairs and *Lamlonh*, who was smiling enigmatically in a corner of the bridge, were hidden from his view.

“We’re pleased to see you are all well, *Fiac*,” said *Dusanh*, keeping it simple.

“Your Majesty, though there were no incidents major enough to cause us to lose ships, there were those who died in the line of duty.”

“And what were their names?”

As they continued their formal back-and-forth, a voluminous amount of information was flowing from the *Clybnochec* to the *Gaftnochec*. That included the details concerning the fatal accident

that occurred during training, as well as the names of the victims. Yet Lafier showed him she could list the seventeen dead from memory. Through the **Emperor** and **Training Fleet Commander-in-Chief's** conversation, there was a sense those names were being elevated. The Abh were areligious, but they were almost excessively respectful of the dead.

"We pay them Our respects and gratitude." *Dusanh* nodded, then added in a consoling tone: "Though it is a sad eventuality to be mourned, it is an eventuality."

"I shall endeavor not to let their deaths go in vain."

"Yes, do so. Let us make it a lesson from which to learn."

"Yes. If I could be allowed an audience, I would like to offer up a more detailed report. May I be permitted this honor?"

"Of course," said *Dusanh*. "We too have things We must tell you."

Lafier was taken aback. This meant she and **Training Fleet 3** might be given a new mission. Rumors to that effect had sprung about many a time up until now, but they hadn't come to pass just yet. Nonetheless, she got the feeling now could finally be her big break.

This was not the first time she had gained an audience with the **Emperor** in her capacity as **Training Fleet Commander-in-Chief**, but *Dusanh* had never before told her that he had things to discuss with her before they met.

"Thank you very much." Lafier held in her confluence of emotions, instead simply expressing her gratitude the audience had been approved.

"Now then, We await you."

The transmission ended.

"The audience is set for eleven hours thirty-seven minutes from now," Jint reported without a moment's delay.

"Then I can get a nap in," murmured Lafier.

"Huh?" Jint raised an eyebrow.

Lafier got huffy. "Am I inconveniencing you?"

"No. As you wish, ma'am," he replied politely.

Chapter 4: *Rüé Semdairh* (Thunder of the Empire)

The name *Gaftnohec* was passed down through generations of ships. Since the Founding of the Empire, the tradition was to name the **flagship** of the **Watchguard Fleet** the *Gaftnohec*. And the **Commander-in-Chief** of the Watchguards was the **Emperor**. In other words, the *Gaftnohec* was the **Imperial Seatship**. That being said, it wasn't a ship that was decked to the nines with gaudy embellishments. The Watchguard Fleet was tasked with defending the **capital** to the death, and its **flagship** had to be combat-capable as well. As such, whichever ship was the most cutting-edge was chosen to be that generation's *Gaftnohec*.

The current *Gaftnohec*, however, was very much the exception to that tradition. It had been built not as the Watchguard Fleet **flagship**, but as the **Mobile Imperial Palace** where the **Emperor** could perform his everyday duties.

The **Imperial Palace** was more than just the **Emperor's** abode. It was the core of the **Empire**. It contained various organizations that ran the Empire, as well as the residential quarters for the people who worked there. Needless to say, a variety of facilities were also needed, not least of which were those to do with telecommunications. That was why the current *Gaftnohec's* volume was exceptional compared to its antecedents. There wasn't nearly enough space for large-scale weapons. It did sport small **laser cannons**, but it would be laughable to call them adequate even just for self-defense, as they were used to shred approaching space refuse. By Empire standards, it was grouped under the "unarmed" classification.

Regardless of how feeble it was, the current *Gaftnohec* was far and away more important than its predecessors by the same name. Yet Lafier couldn't help but recall the previous *Gaftnohec*, which was a **patrol ship**. The current **Imperial Seatship** felt corpulent and indolent by comparison. And judging by how there were sometimes proposals to make the **Mobile Imperial Palace** and the **Watchguard Fleet Flagship** different ships, there was no shortage of people who felt likewise. They couldn't stand seeing an **Imperial Seatship** that was unable to fight. They wanted the **Watchguard Fleet** and its **flagship** to be the final shields protecting the imperial capital.

But that was pure indulgence. As the **Empire** stood now, it

couldn't afford to repeat the battle to defend Lahkfacar. So many Abhs died in that battle, including the previous sovereign, *Lamagh*.

Currently, the **Watchguard Fleet** was the **capital**. While Lahkfacar Sela ("Tentative Lahkfacar") was at first the provisional name for the *bach* orbital cities formed at the **Sohtryoor Astrobase**, it was now another name for the Watchguard Fleet, just as "**Mobile Imperial Palace**" was now another name for the *Gaftnochec*. There were even rumors the Watchguard Fleet would be officially renamed Lahkfacar Sela so as to avoid confusion.

The *Gaftnochec* was situated at the center of Lahkfacar Sela, and the *Glagac Byrer Claiïar* (Training Fleet Flagship) *Clybnochec* approached. Two **smallcrafts** took off from within the *Clybnochec*, soon to be inhaled by the **Mobile Imperial Palace**. **Abidcant Lamlonh** took one, while Lafier took the other, each accompanied by personnel.

Upon stepping down from the **smallcrafts**, she mounted the **personal transporter** without a moment's pause and headed for the **Audience Chamber**. Nary a moment passed after the **transporter** began to move that Lafier felt an oppressive weight on her shoulders.

"Are you feeling unwell?" asked a concerned Sobash, who was standing beside her.

It seemed that her feelings had shown through the look on her face.

"I'm all right," she replied through a strained smile. "I trust you're not under the mistaken impression I'm *nervous*."

"You aren't?"

"No."

A shocking remark.

"I thought even a **commander-in-chief** like you might grow nervous in the presence of **His Majesty**. I'm told that, although you may both be members of the Abliar Clan, your relationship is not without a sense of distance."

It was certainly true that the **Eight Royal Families** that made up the **Imperial Family** had branched apart long, long ago. Relations between them had never ceased, but their conscious awareness of each other as blood relatives was far from strong, to say nothing of whether they thought of each other as "family."

Yet Lafier had known *Dusanh* when he was the **King of Barkeh** — in fact, she'd known him for as long as she could remember. In her eyes, *Dusanh* wasn't some distant relative. He was her father's old friend. She had a vague feeling he'd showed her affection when she was a wee one. Though strangely enough, when concrete memories resurfaced, she lost any confidence that did happen.

In any case, just because he'd acceded to the **emperorship** didn't mean she'd suddenly get nervous around him.

“Then what is troubling you?” asked Sobash.

“Nothing. I was just thinking this path could stand to be a little wider, that’s all.”

The path down which the **transporter** was taking them seemed lacking in both width and height. And it wasn’t just cramped. It was sinuous and twisty. The makeup of the *Gaftnohec*’s interior was intricate, with no open space due to the multitude of institutions and facilities that needed to be crammed into it. The twisty, narrow path frankly represented not just the ship’s cramped layout, but also the state of poverty the Empire had sunk to, which irked Lafier.

“I see,” said Sobash, who looked convinced. “It doesn’t suit the **Imperial Palace**, you mean.”

Lafier nodded. “It’s satisfactory for a ship passageway, though.”

Jint cut into the conversation: “Wait, from the old video footage I’ve seen, the passages in the city-ship *Abliar* were like this, too.”

“That cannot be.” She herself didn’t understand why, but that had made her sullen. “Granted, there may have been passages like this one, but the main passages must have been wider.”

“You may be right,” said Jint.

“I am right. You got the wrong idea.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Compared to the city-ship *Abliar*, which once housed hundreds of thousands, as well as to its successor, the **Imperial Palace**, the **Mobile Imperial Palace** was a great deal smaller.

As an **interstellar ship**, the *Gaftnohec* had to pass through **planar space** to reach its destinations. Interstellar ships needed to be enclosed in pockets of fourth-dimensional space named **space-time bubbles** when plying **planar space**, and those **bubbles** could only contain so much mass. The mass limit imposed by the “laws” of physics was so strict and unforgiving that it felt silly to compare it to the law. Before the Empire was founded, the city-ship *Abliar* harnessed the power gushing out of eight **closed portals**, flying only through **3-space**. After it was placed in orbit around the sun named *Abliar*, it began to expand without restriction. The current incarnation could never compete in terms of size. Needless to say, the scale of their interiors was also orders of magnitude apart.

Eventually, they arrived at an anteroom leading to the **Audience Chamber**, and Lafier and company dismounted the **transporter**.

The door opened.

The **Ceremony Master** raised his voice: “The **Training Fleet Commander-in-Chief**, **Her Highness the Viscountess of *Parhynh***, as well as her **staff officers**.”

Though the passage leading here was tight, the **Audience Chamber** was spacious, and by no means inferior to its counterpart by

the same name in the **Imperial Palace** of old.

To the Abh, who spent their whole lives in artificial environments with seldom any chance to get used to **landworlds**, wide open chambers kept at room temperature were in themselves extravagant and marvelous. But the Chamber impressed through more than just its sheer volume, for nowhere could the ornamentation be called subpar. They needed to maintain a dazzling and ornate chamber precisely because it was an era of hardship.

Lafier paced forward while the *Sach Arobhotr* (Military Band NCCs) played the **Imperial Anthem**. Her gaze turned to the ceiling. The **crest banners** of the **grandeess** hung down from it, just like the old Imperial Palace. There was, however, one big difference — the light. The bygone **Audience Chamber** was always bathed in the light of the sun of Abliar. Yet now that that sun was in enemy hands, there could be no similar treatment. As such, the only illumination the ceiling provided was run-of-the-mill artificial light.

Located at the back of the Chamber was the **Jade Throne**, just like the one that was located in the previous **Imperial Palace**, and **Emperor Dusanh** was seated upright upon it.

“**Your Majesty**.” Lafier bowed profoundly.

“**Viscountess of Parhynh** Lafier, **Training Fleet Commander-in-Chief**, has come to visit.”

“*Fiac*,” said *Dusanh* from atop the **Throne**. “You and your subordinates have Our gratitude.”

“I stand humbled and grateful.”

“Now then, lay upon these ears of Ours what We must know,” said the **Emperor**.

“Yes,” said Lafier. “At present, **Training Fleet 3** contains 121 **assault sub-fleets**, 18 **recon sub-fleets**, 22 **strike sub-fleets**, 31 **supply sub-fleets**, 3 *iadbyrec üacér* (airship sub-fleets), and a handful of independent squadrons, and all of them have reached the proficiency necessary to take on actual combat. In addition, the number of **soldiers and personnel** permitted to wear **twin-winged circlets** is...”

Lafier spent the next five or so minutes reporting information in more detail than the communication before.

“So that’s how it is.” *Dusanh* nodded, satisfied by her report. “We appreciate your hard work. Our heart delights in the things all of you have accomplished, and We take pride in your doings. You are hereby dismissed from the post of **Training Fleet Commander-in-Chief**.”

“Understood.” Lafier tensed up. She would finally be assigned a new role. But she was anxious at the same time — perhaps the **Emperor** was displeased by the current state of the **Training Fleet**, and there was a possibility she would be given a do-nothing job as a

consequence. Only during times like these did she grow nervous around him, and she awaited the **Emperor's** words.

A **chamberlain** held a **crest banner** reverently with both hands and walked up to the **Throne's** side. The **Emperor** stood up abruptly and accepted it.

“**Training Fleet 3** shall operate independently of the **Training Fleet**, and shall be renamed the *Byrec Raudrochotr* (Thunderpeal Fleet),” declared *Dusanh*. “Come forth, **Imperial Admiral Fiac Boerr Parhnyr**.”

“Yes.”

Lafier climbed the stairs up to the **Throne**. When she stopped walking upon reaching the top, *Dusanh* offered the **crest banner** in both hands.

“We appoint you the *Glaharérh Byrer Raudrochotr*. We bid you take command.”

“I thank Your Majesty for your decree,” she said from the heart, taking the banner. “I humbly take the fleet upon myself.”

“Good,” smiled a nodding *Dusanh*. “Prithee make the revival of the **Empire** and the **Star Forces** reverberate across every corner of the galaxy.”

“In what manner?” she asked under her breath, unable to bottle up her curiosity. “Will we be returning to Lahkfacar?”

“Don’t be so hasty,” said *Dusanh*, whispering as well. “You’ll be given the details later.”

She was eager to know, but this was a place of ceremony, not debate. She had no choice but to back down for now.

Lafier descended down the stairs while still facing the **Throne**. She was perceiving the stairs through her *frocragh*, so this posed no danger to her. Her **circlet** probed her surroundings through EM waves, and information was beamed from her *froch* spatio-sensory organ into the *rilbidoc* “navigation area” of her brain. Thus did the Abh perceive the contours of their surroundings. It was also how Lafier knew who had entered the **Audience Chamber**.

“**Abdicant Nisothe-Lamlonn**,” called the Ceremony Master.

Lamlonn didn’t take any personnel with her, and she strode up toward the **Throne** with an extremely breezy gait. *Dusanh* stood up and descended the stairs in order to greet the **Abdicant Empress**. Consequently, Lafier had to take another step back. Her *frocragh* noticed Jint was drawing closer.

“Allow me to hold onto the banner,” he whispered from right behind her shoulder.

“Please.”

Lafier handed him the banner, and Jint returned to his original position. She was relieved to have the heavy flag off her hands. The

Emperors current and **Abdicant** were now exchanging greetings.

"We are quite happy to see you again, *Nisoeth*," said *Dusanh* respectfully.

"It really is a pleasure. I am also pleased, **Your Majesty**, to see the **Mobile Imperial Palace's** majestic mien remains unscathed.

Incidentally, now that *Fiac Lamhirr* is stepping down as the **Training Fleet Commander-in-Chief**, might I also be getting dismissed?"

"It would be presumptuous of Us to tell you directly, *Nisoeth*."

"But you're the one who decides these things, surely."

"Oh, no, perish the thought. We merely petition the **Council of Abdicants**. It is the **Council** that bears the right to decide."

"Officially, yes."

"There are times when the pretense is important, *Nisoeth*."

"Now **Your Majesty** is being presumptuous. You would lecture an **abdicant**?"

In *Lamlonh's* mouth, the phrase "*Érumittonn*" (Your Majesty) sounded like the name of some naughty child she was admonishing.

"Our apologies, *Nisoeth*." *Dusanh* bowed his head. "That aside, We shall consult with the **Council of Abdicants**."

"Then let's leave it at that, shall we? I'll be going to greet *Nisoeth-Dugasr* now."

"If We were to say, 'please do so,' would We be scolded for Our presumptuousness again?"

"Why must you even bring it up if you already know? I've always found the words and deeds of the **House of Barkeh** baffling."

"Our apologies."

"*Fiac*," said *Lamlonh*, addressing Lafier. "Congratulations on your new position. I hope it's a better fit for you than the **Training Fleet**."

"Thank you very much," replied Lafier.

Dusanh's courtiers and Lafier's **staff officers** waited patiently while the three **Imperials** conversed.

Lamlonh whispered into Lafier's ear: "But I take it neither of us is terribly keen to run into the other aboard the same ship again."

Lafier was dangerously close to agreeing, but she stopped herself in time. "No, I don't think so. I still need your guidance, *Nisoeth*."

Lamlonh flashed her a pitying smile and put a hand to her cheek. "*Fiac Lamhirr*. You used to be so much truer to yourself. Though that sober seriousness suits you to the **House of Clyoov**."

"I cannot stay a child forever."

"That is the sad truth."

"If I may, *Nisoeth*," interjected *Dusanh*.

"Ordering us to be on our way, are you?"

"Thank you very much for picking up on that."

"I swear, you *Néic Lamsarrs*!" *Lamlonh* laughed mirthfully and

exited tramping.

Lafier bowed her head in *Lamlonh's* direction from behind.

"*Fiac*," said *Dusanh*. "Let's meet at the *Üalodiach* (Supreme Command Base)."

"Understood, Your Majesty. Please allow me to take a moment's respite."

As for who would fill the new **Training Fleet Commander-in-Chief** vacancy, it was decided **Star Forces Admiral Cic**, the **Training Fleet 1 Commander-in-Chief**, would hold both posts concurrently for the time being. The **Training Fleet Commander-in-Chief** would be transferred to *Glagamh Byrer Raudrochotr* (Thunderpeal Fleet Command) forthwith. Her **staff officers**, from **Chief of Staff Commodore** Sobash down, would remain as holdovers. Fleets 1 and 2 would be placed outside of her command, so the few **staff officers** who were responsible for those fleets had to leave the **command center**.

Unlike her personnel, the fleet's name display and **crest** had to be completely altered. When it came to whole fleets, even just changing the name was a big to-do. For the time being, Jint would be swamped with all the work these tasks demanded.

Serves him right, thought Lafier.

Of course, Jint wasn't the only one who was busy. He would be giving his commander a mountain of items to approve. After Sobash, Jint and the others took a breather, Lafier's own hell would commence. As tedious as it was, this was in fact the calm before the storm for **Thunderpeal Fleet Command**.

Lafier and her **staff officers** were lent a section of the *Gaftnochec*, and in one of its rooms, the *Graich Arcileforosr* (Hall of Nemophila), were gathered the *catboth* (command center soldiers and personnel). Just as the name suggested, *arcilefoross* (nemophila flowers) were in bloom all around. Also known as baby blue eyes, the flowers were white in the center with bluish purple edges. It was as though the room was blanketed by a carpet of sky blue.

Lafier and the **staff officers** were seated at the white table situated in the middle of the room. Meanwhile, robo-waiters served drinks and snacks.

"How will the next operation go?" said **Deca-Commander** Lecsh, who occupied the seat of lowest rank among the five **Strategy Staff Officers** and was principally in charge of all things artillery. Genetically, she was Lafier's cousin on her mother's side, but since Abh society had no system of marriage, they saw and treated each other as unrelated.

"I hope it's recapturing Lahkfacar, personally," replied Lafier, before remembering what position she was in and adding: "Though no

matter what the operation may entail, if it is an imperial decree, I shall pour my body and soul into realizing it.”

I’m glad Lamlonh isn’t here right now, she thought. She could hardly endure those pitying eyes.

“I can understand why,” said Jint. “To all of the fine folks gathered here, Lahkfacar is home.”

“Not to me it isn’t,” muttered **Associate Commodore** Ecryua, the *Ruséc Casarér* (Vice Chief of Staff).

Unlike the vast majority of Abhs in her age group, she was not born in Lahkfacar. Rather, she was born in an **artificial womb** her father brought onto his trade vessel.

“Now that you mention it, it’s also not home to me,” said Jint. “Let’s say *most* of the fine folks here.”

“Plus, it would be an unparalleled honor for our fleet,” said **Vice Hecto-Commander Gnomboch**.

“And just in terms of pure strategy,” said Sobash, “retaking Lahkfacar would be an excellent play.”

If they could take back Lahkfacar, the cornerstone of the **Eight Monarchies**, then it’d resolve a good half of the **Empire’s** current troubles. And it might wreak havoc on the enemy, too.

“May we ask you to report to **His Majesty the Emperor**, *Glaharérh*?” asked *Gnomboch*, eyes shining with expectation.

“There’s no need for such a thing. **His Majesty** must already be considering it,” said Lafier. “Besides...”

“Yes, ma’am?”

Lafier shook her head. “No, it’s nothing.”

Jint was grinning by her side.

“Do you have something you’d like to add?” asked Lafier, peeved.

“Nothing in particular, ma’am,” he said, reverting his expression to neutral.

“No fair, **Adjutant**,” said *Gnomboch*. “You clearly know something.”

“Oh, I don’t *know* anything,” said Jint. “I just have a guess, that’s all. And I bet I’m not the only one.”

“Well,” nodded Sobash, “I must admit I think the **Commander-in-Chief** is hoping for a promotion to a *Ghocssimh* (Supreme Commander) position.”

Gnomboch’s twinkling eyes were, to Lafier, somewhat irksome.

“I can’t deny it would make me happy,” she reluctantly admitted.

“I wouldn’t have to report to the throne. I could simply assert we’re retaking Lahkfacar.”

The **Supreme Commander** and their **staff officers** participated in the **Supreme Command Base Council** under witness of the **Emperor**. It was the highest military organ, and it was made up of only four

members, the **Emperor** and the three **Supreme Commanders**: the **Military Command Director**, the *Ūalodh Bhosorr* (Military Administration Director), and the **Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief**. The Base had no full-time personnel, and the clerical work was handled by **chamberlains**.

Of the three, the **Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief** position was purely ceremonious during peacetime, but it was the position traditionally held by the **Crown Prince or Princess**, so when war came knocking, it became a post of significant responsibility, leading the main body of the **Star Forces** and standing on the frontlines of battle. They attracted more attention than even the **Emperor**, and there were those who described their status as the most glamorous in all the **Empire**.

But at the moment, the **Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief** spot was vacant. The seat was too exalted for a mere provisional **Crown Princess**. As such, the Empire had at present only two **Supreme Commanders**. It was eminently possible she could get promoted to a **Supreme Commander** position thanks to her achievements forging the Training Fleet into battle-ready warriors. And then she'd be able to take part in formulating strategies on the national scale.

"It's happening?" murmured Ecryua.

"It would be nice," replied Sobash.

Ecryua was usually a woman of few words, but she was appointed **Vice Chief of Staff** because she became voluble when necessary. The reason she was being so laconic now was because this was just idle chatter. After all, Ecryua was doubtlessly indifferent to whether or not Lafier became a **Supreme Commander**.

To Lafier, however, her prospective promotion was a weighty matter, and so she didn't appreciate it being talked about merely to kill time.

The *Almcasariac Rirragr* (Senior Information Staff Officer), **Kilo-Commander Cnatai**, changed the subject: "I think the operation might entail fortifying the *Deuctic Borperr* (Twin Thorns Corridor)."

The half of the Empire that the **Emperor** presided over was further split into two halves. One half was prowled by Lahkfacar Sela, and consisted of the combined territory of the **Wesco** and **Barkeh Monarchies**, where the **construction sites** and more had been assembled. It was called the *Ssorh Semr* (Upper Sector). The *Ssorh Leumr* (Lower Sector) was made up of the **Raseess** and **Syoorgzedeh Monarchies**, as well as the new territories they'd snatched from the United Humankind. While it was once the case that every monarchy possessed a **portal** leading to the **imperial capital**, and so there had been no "upper" or "lower" distinction, things had changed. The **Twin Thorns Corridor** connected the Upper and Lower Sectors. It divided

the spheres of influence of the PSSU and UH; stretching past the rim of the Central Sector of the **Milky Way Portal-Belts**, it traversed the UH sphere of influence and led to the **Syoorgzedeh Monarchy**. It was named after the campaign that created it, **Operation Twin Thorns**.

The Corridor was worryingly thin, and if it was severed, the **Upper** and **Lower Sectors** would lose access to each other. But that wasn't all. To the Empire, the Corridor was an important connecting passageway — and to the enemy, it was a foul barrier. It segmented the UH's sphere of influence, succeeding in isolating nearly half of the entire nation.

All in all, in order to reestablish contact, the UH had to gain control of the Corridor, and if they could manage to do so, it would weaken the Empire even more. It was little wonder, then, how fierce the struggle for the Corridor was. It was with its vulnerability and importance in mind that the *Byrec Deuctir* (Corridor Fleet) was founded, with **Imperial Admiral** Tlife as its **Commander-in-Chief** to defend it.

If all had gone according to plan, then the suppression of the isolated part of the UH would have been conducted following the completion of the **Twin Thorns Corridor**, and preparations had been made to that end, but the Fall of Lahkfacar set those plans back.

Now that their forces were in order, perhaps now was the time to bring the isolated enemy area to heel, and there was every chance that that was the mission that would be entrusted to the **Thunderpeal Fleet**.

"It's possible," agreed Lafier. Secretly, however, she would be disappointed if that ended up being true.

She hadn't been lying when she said she'd devote her body and soul to any mission, but she would be questioning the strategic prowess of Central all the while. It *would* be of inestimable value to stabilize the Corridor and annex new territories. But it would be too roundabout and impractical. The area was isolated, yes, but the enemy forces there were still plenty strong. One of the technologies that was indispensable for the maintenance of interstellar powers was **space-time bubble generators**. The Empire had once concentrated their bubble generator manufacturing in Lahkfacar, but the UH had long since decentralized production across several different star systems, and the territory with the greatest production capacity in the UH, the Caspill System, existed in that area. Moreover, there were other star systems there that boasted production capacity in spades for things besides just **bubble generators**. Lastly, they were nothing if not politically unified. Their power to wage war was considerable. Conquering it would take a long time, and it wasn't a guaranteed victory, either. There was the possibility they'd be unable to hold the

line elsewhere. The way Lafier saw it, it was something they could handle at their leisure once they retook Lahkfacar.

More speculation flew from the **staff officers'** mouths about the operation to come, but that discussion could never be anything more than an intellectual exercise meant to kill time.

The enemy's movements were not communicated to the **Training Fleet** in much detail. They were of course kept abreast of what enemy tactics and equipment had newly come to light, since it was also the **Training Fleet's** mission to study countermeasures. In the unlikely event that they encountered them, intel as to the distribution of enemy forces was always kept up to date as well.

However, when it came to the enemy's overall might, they had no choice but to try and extrapolate. It made sense that **Military Command Headquarters** had more detailed info, and Lafier and company knew only a fraction of it.

*I'm supposed to be the next in line for **Empress**, even if only for the time being. Yet they're taking me so lightly.* That too made Lafier disgruntled, though she knew if she voiced that sentiment, she would be thought of as childish.

Since the **Training Fleet** became the **Thunderpeal Fleet**, new information would be brought in, but it had not been done yet. That likely wouldn't change until she went to the **Supreme Command Base**. So she mused while listening to the **staff officers'** conversation.

Then came a **chamberlain**: "**Your Highness**. *Fiac Boërr Spyrh* (Her Highness the Viscountess of *Spyrh*) says she would like to accompany you. Would that be to your liking?"

The **Viscountess of Spyrh** *Abliarsec Néic Dúairr Lamdaigh* was one of the few remaining **Imperials** Lafier's age. Her military record was unremarkable. She had joined the military later in her life, and her promotion tack was slow. She was currently of the **Grand Commodore rank**, but just as with Lafier's **Crown Princess** status, that abnormally high rank could only owe itself to the state of emergency. She was the *Roï Glaharérh Rùaborair* (Watchguard Fleet Vice Commander-in-Chief).

What does she want from me? she thought. But she had no reason to turn her invitation down: "That's fine."

A chamberlain set up a chair next to Lafier and left.

When *Lamdaigh* turned up, Lafier stood up to greet her. Naturally, the **staff officers** also stood up.

The woman came alone, stopping in her tracks right in front of Lafier. She bowed her head: "*Fiac Cilugair* (Your Highness the Crown Princess)."

"Fiac Lamdaigr. It's been a while."

“It truly has.”

Lafier was also her senior by age, albeit only by a year. She offered *Lamdaigh* a seat, and sat down herself.

“Let me introduce my **staff officers**.” She indicated her staff officers by hand and stated their names one by one.

Lamdaigh smilingly inclined her head with each introduction, but her eyes were not so cheery.

“*Fiac*,” said *Lamdaigh*, once the introductions were over. “I’d like to congratulate you on your new office.”

“You have my thanks.”

“I’m quite jealous. I’ve far too much free time on my hands, and it’s driving me crazy.”

“**Watchguard Fleet Vice Commander-in-Chief** is a heavy responsibility, I’m certain. If something pressing should arise, you’re the next in line to be entrusted with the fleet by **His Majesty**.”

“Many of my colleagues are my seniors, so I believe the fleet coming under my command would be put off for some time.”

“That’s not necessarily true.”

“You’re kind, but I’m sure that even if it were placed under my command, I would be given some trifling tasks to do.”

“There is no such thing as a trifling task in the **Star Forces** now,” Lafier chided her.

“Forgive my slip of the tongue. Nevertheless, I won’t be standing at the frontlines. But **Your Highness** will be fighting on the frontlines commanding the **Thunderpeal Fleet**.”

“I haven’t yet been informed what my new mission will be, *Fiac*.”

“You will be a **Supreme Commander** and take part in deciding what the new mission will be, will you not?”

“I hope so, but I do not know.”

“*Fiac*.” *Lamdaigh*’s eyes turned serious. “Even if you don’t become one now, I’m sure you will be eventually. When that time comes, please put me on the frontlines.”

Lafier tilted her head in puzzlement. “Ought I make you my subordinate, then?”

“If it is within your power, I humbly ask you to entrust me with an independent fleet.”

Oh, so you don’t want to serve under me. Lafier felt awkward.

“You could ask **His Majesty the Emperor**, surely?” asked Lafier.

“What makes you think I haven’t done so?” It seemed *Lamdaigh* was a tad indignant. She must feel her abilities were unfairly underrated. Her gaze was reproving.

“Because if you asked **His Majesty**, then there should be no reason to ask me,” replied Lafier.

“It’s just as you say. But I think we should be prepared for all

possibilities.”

Lafier felt like she understood now: *Is she laying the groundwork for when I potentially accede to the throne?*

If something were to happen to *Dusanh* now, Lafier would become **Empress**. She was insinuating that she had the confidence to fill the position that Lafier currently possessed in that event.

In the Empire, *cilugragh* (order of succession) was set in stone. The first in line was of course the **Crown Heir**, but every place in the line after that was decided from among the **Imperials** of the **Crown Heir**'s generation. For example, before the Fall, Lafier's father, **King Dubeus of Clyoov**, was fourth in line.

But at the moment, even Lafier doubted whether she deserved to be first in line for the throne, and she was regarded with skepticism. As a matter of fact, Lafier's investiture as Crown Princess had not been decided without friction. Many of the **Imperials** had been killed in action because of the Abliars' cursed proclivity to jump headlong toward the battlefield. There were also many **Imperials**, such as Dubeus, whose whereabouts were unknown. Among those known by the **Council of Abdicants** to be safe and sound, the one with the highest place in the order of succession after *Dusanh* was the seventh in line, the *Larth Ilicr* (King of Ileesh) *Dudaubh*. Unsurprisingly, they believed *he* should be the **Crown Heir**. Yet the **Council** nominated Lafier as **Crown Princess**. Perhaps they couldn't abide by the notion of the **Emperor** and the **Crown Heir** being of the same generation, which would engender a sense of stagnation, as though the Empire had no future. Lafier's youth actually figured into her valuation.

Dudaubh was currently second in line for the throne, with the third being the **Abdicant** Dugahs. They believed that young **Imperials** in Lafier's generation wouldn't be able to cope with the anomaly of losing both the **Empress** and **Crown Heir** at the same time. If *Dusanh* collapsed this very moment, Lafier would accede. However, the new **Crown Heir** could not be chosen from among the generations following Lafier's. They were just too young. The **Emperor** of the Abh was not a figurehead position that could be held while suckling a pacifier. It wasn't impossible they would be chosen from among the generations born before Lafier's, but in all likelihood, somebody else from her generation would be made **Crown Heir**.

In other words, *Lamdaigh* could be angling to be the **Empress** after next, though she would of course deny it if asked. It was a morbid desire, given it was premised around *Dusanh*'s early demise. Or perhaps she was aiming to be the next **Empress** instead of Lafier. Thinking about it dispassionately, Lafier believed herself to be more Abliar-ish than someone like *Lamdaigh*, and thus more suited to be **Empress**. However, *Lamdaigh*'s ambition did not displease her. The

struggle for the **throne** was a lonely one. It would be a thing of sadness to look behind her and see no one chasing after her.

Chapter 5: The Supreme Command Base

The **Supreme Command Base** Assembly she'd long awaited took place seventeen hours following that audience with the Emperor.

The only facility used exclusively by the **Supreme Command Base** was a meeting hall, and that hall was also called the Supreme Command Base. It was there Lafier was taking her main **staff officers**, using a **personal transporter** complete with seating.

The **Base** had no artificial gravity. The whole room was spherical, with red-flowered trees planted along the walls. The **transporter** began gradually slowing down once it entered the room. Deceleration took longer than in compartments that did have artificial gravity. One might expect Lafier and the others to lurch forward due to inertia, but they were used to microgravity since birth, so they unconsciously shifted their weight and maintained their positions. Only one of the **staff officers** failed to do so, and that was Jint. As he was land-born, he didn't handle microgravity all that well. He started floating away from the **transporter**, but by hurriedly grasping onto the handrail, he avoided any trouble.

Lafier believed she should take umbrage at his sloppiness, but for some reason, she felt relieved. Thankfully, everyone here was Lafier's subordinate. Lafier elected not to upbraid him.

There were four entrances/exits to the **Base**. Directly across from the one Lafier's group entered through, the door was shut. The doors on the left and right were open, with the **Military Command Director, Imperial Admiral** Kenesh, leading her **staff officers** in through one of them and the **Military Administration Director, Imperial Admiral** *Lecæmh* (Lekeff), doing so through the other.

Once the three senior officers were assembled, the door across from Lafier opened at last. **Emperor** *Dusanh* entered, accompanied only by two **chamberlain guards**. His **staff officers** were Kenesh and Lekeff and their respective subordinates, who were already here.

"Glaharérh Byrer Raudrochotr."

Getting called by her new title like that made Lafier nervous. "Yes."

"We command you to execute *Cfazaitec Raudrochotr* (Operation Thunderpeal). We're sure the **Command Director** will explain the operation to you."

I knew it would be this way, thought Lafier. She felt isolated and empty inside. She was hoping she could participate in the most momentous meetings in the **Empire** from this day forward, but this time she was still only in the position of being told what had already been decided. In all likelihood, she wouldn't be hailed as a **Supreme Commander**, at least not until after their next victory.

At least tell me **Operation Thunderpeal's** *objective is Lahkfacar.*

"*Fiac Glaharérr*," said Kenesh. "We would like **Your Highness** to reconnect us with the **Skeer Monarchy**."

"Understood." Lafier tasted disappointment once again. Of course, contact with the **Skeer Monarchy** could be reestablished by retaking Lahkfacar, too, but as far as Lafier was aware, **Imperial Admiral** Kenesh disliked beating around the bush. If the planned invasion route went through the capital, she would have asked Lafier to help retake Lahkfacar.

"Here is the marching path."

The **planar space map** was projected over the entire chamber. Then the fleet's planned path began stretching from the **Wesco Monarchy**, which had been retained as Empire territory.

Couldn't they have at least let me choose the marching path? Lafier grumbled inwardly. She had a feeling that not letting her in on decisions of the strategic dimension was a mark of how little trust Central placed in her. It was hitting home how her current status was not based on her track record, but rather on her blood.

Lafier had matured enough not to let her discontent spill out. She would simply prove she was worthy through her accomplishments. So she kept quiet and watched as the path continued extending. Between the **Wesco** and **Skeer Monarchies** lay the sphere of influence of the PSSU. As the planned path cut through the territory, little explosion effects played whenever it hit an enemy base. Then, it arrived at a certain star system: Nohv Kinshass — the PSSU's primary star system.

Lafier found herself looking at Kenesh's face.

"Yes," nodded the **Military Command Director**. "While you are out blazing a connecting path to **Skeer**, we would like you to snuff out the PSSU as well."

Lafier turned it over in her mind.

"Are you unhappy with the Union as your foe?" asked *Dusanh*.

"No, Your Majesty, such discourteous thoughts did not occur to me."

"Then count Us relieved."

She didn't wish to snub the enemy nation, the People's Sovereign Stellar Union. Paying respect to the enemy was the Abliar way, just as it was to honor the dead.

"I was reflecting on where our number one objective lies," said

Lafier. “Is our top priority to secure contact with the **Skeer Monarchy**, or is it the Union’s surrender?”

“*Fiac*, it’s the Union’s surrender, of course,” replied Kenesh immediately. “Keeping in mind the Union’s structure, it’s thought that taking the primary star system will lead to the nation’s collapse. And if we manage that, contact with **Skeer** will be reestablished in due course.”

“Am I correct to think that, in the event Nohv Kinshass falls but the Union doesn’t collapse, that the operation will be continued regardless?”

As its *Glaharérh*, she believed she was quite familiar with her fleet’s force of arms. What she didn’t know was the enemy’s strength.

“No, *Fiac*,” said Kenesh. “I regret to inform you that we cannot prepare enough firepower for that contingency. We would temporarily halt the advance. We want you to do your best to secure the occupied territory, but we will allow withdrawal depending on the situation.”

“And that will be left up to our **Fleet Command** to decide, I imagine,” Lafier told the **Emperor**.

“That is correct,” nodded *Dusanh*. “We cannot afford to lose the **Thunderpeal Fleet**.”

“That is a relief, Your Majesty.”

If they’d had to wait for permission from Central during a state of emergency, it wouldn’t reach them in time. If *Dusanh* had said otherwise, it would inexorably lead to an insurrection against him. But while that choice would be preferable to sending her subordinates to fruitless deaths, it would be a harder choice for her than her own death. She was also relieved that the **Emperor** wasn’t incompetent enough to be issuing outrageous commands. The avuncular *Dusanh* she knew was a lover of unsavory quips and japes, but it seemed he drew a sharp distinction as to when and when not to exhibit that vicious sense of humor.

Dusanh cocked his head. “We trust you couldn’t possibly be entertaining any *irreverent* thoughts at the moment, *Fiac*.”

“No, sire. I was simply recalling a trifling matter,” said Lafier, though she could feel her heartbeat rising. “What of the blockade of the **Wesco Portal**?”

The **Wesco Portal** led to Lahkfacar. That meant the **Portal** and what lay beyond it were now enemy territory. If enemy fleets invaded Empire territory through it, the **Thunderpeal Fleet**’s ongoing operation would be threatened. In the worst-case scenario, it could even end up severing contact between the fleet and Central. The blockade had to be maintained at all costs up until the operation was complete.

“We’d like for your fleet to defend it as well,” said *Dusanh*.

Lafier and Sobash exchanged glances.

Thinking about it, it made all the sense in the world. The Empire's war potential was still meager. If the **Thunderpeal Fleet** was sent on the offensive, then it would take all the military had just to maintain the current defense setup. It was eminently possible that the **Four Nations Alliance**, knowing of the invasion of the PSSU, would launch a counter-invasion from the **Wesco Portal**. In that case, the **Star Forces** would have to make their defenses sturdier still, but they hadn't the resources to spare. Moreover, so long as the invasion against the Union and the security of the **Wesco Portal** remained closely related, it would be preferable to carry out both under a single **command center**. Yet it wasn't as though the **Thunderpeal Fleet** had an overabundance of firepower, and while it seemed **Military Command** had deemed it possible, Lafier didn't find that alone terribly reassuring.

"There is something I would like to verify, if I may," said Lafier. "Do we have the right of refusal?"

"Heavens yes," replied *Dusanh* promptly. "But there is something else you ought to know: we do not regard the **Thunderpeal Fleet** and the current **command center** as inseparable."

In other words, if Lafier vetoed, she would be dismissed and replaced.

"*Fiac*," said Kenesh. "We cannot allow the **Empire** to stagnate any further. We can be certain the enemy isn't frittering away their time. Wiping out the PSSU and reestablishing contact with **Skeer** is the optimal course of action, as hammered out by **Military Command**."

"*Fiac*," said **Military Administration Director** Lekeff. "This is also the most efficient plan in terms of the military's finances. As for the level of risk, to that I defer to my wonderful colleagues, but I can assure you the returns are worth it. This throw of the dice will truly pay dividends."

"And we did not devise this plan solely in the hopes of a moving reunion between parent and child," said *Dusanh*.

"I am aware of that, sire."

Lafier retracted the assessment she'd made of *Dusanh* moments prior — this was not the place to be manifesting his penchant for wicked raillery.

As a matter of fact, Lafier was quite displeased. It was supposed that her father and brother were somewhere beyond the PSSU, but there was no way to contact them directly, and so they couldn't figure out their state of affairs with any precision. They knew for sure the **Star Forces** were going strong in **Skeer** and actively fighting against the **FNA**. It had also been confirmed that the **King of Clyoov**, Dubeus, had taken command for at least a period of time after the Dividing.

But they had no inkling of their current situation. It wasn't even clear Dubeus was still alive, and Duhier's whereabouts were even more unclear. There was intel that Duhier was made a temporary **Crown Prince** under Dubeus, but it was unconfirmed. It went without saying that Lafier hoped they were alive and well, and that she anxiously awaited their reunion. Yet it felt as though the **Emperor** was ridiculing her for it.

“Our apologies, now *We're* being rude.” *Dusanh* smiled.

Was he taking back what he'd said earlier? If someone took offense at every little thing he said, they were unequal to being a retainer under *Dusanh*.

“No, sire.” Lafier bowed her head. “If that is so, then I can but follow Your Majesty's orders with humility.”

The **Emperor** nodded. “We expect great things from you. The sooner you launch the operation, the better, but We shall grant you sixty days.”

“Understood, sire. I will analyze our options posthaste.”

Lafier's mind was seized by a wave of apprehension, and it was the kind that couldn't be resolved through consulting with **Fleet Command**. Even so, she didn't query the **Emperor** right then and there about it. She would learn the answer for herself sooner rather than later... Would the **Command Center Abdicant** follow her to the **Thunderpeal Fleet**?

Chapter 6: The *Fanigac Glagamar* (Command Center Abdicant)

Just as expected, Lafier's misgivings gave way to certainty in no time.

"You seem disappointed, *Fiac*," said *Lamlonh*. "Though it's not exactly as though I'm delighted, either."

"I am aware, *Nisoht*," replied Lafier.

They were at the cabin of the **Command Center Abdicant** aboard the **flagship** *Clybnochec*. It was the most spacious room aboard ship, yet it could not be called worthy of an **abdicant empress** like her. Moreover, part of it was allotted as the courtiers' cabin, making it even more cramped.

The fixtures were kept at a minimum, so much so that one might think it was the room of a newly appointed **starpilot**. *Lamlonh* likely didn't intend to stay there for very long. She no doubt aimed to be able to move away with just a single piece of hand luggage at any time. Unfortunately for her, she had been designated the *Fanigac Glagamar Byrer Raudrochotr* (Thunderpeal Fleet Command Abdicant). She would have to continue staying in this room and warming a seat in the **Commander's Bridge** for some time to come.

"If given the choice, I'd have liked to go to **Training Fleet 1** or thereabouts," said *Lamlonh*. "I'd like to muck around with our futures far from the battlefield."

This surprised Lafier. "Are you averse to the battlefield, Your Eminence?"

"It's not the battlefield I dislike, so much as occupied territory. So frequently, we fall into truly *inelegant* circumstances."

Lafier was feeling uneasy about that, too. She had once carried out a misery of a mission as a **lady agent**. That mission revolved around a **landworld** that was dealing with an extraordinary situation, but the story was similar enough elsewhere, too. Each **landworld** had its distinguishing idiosyncrasies, and the spacefaring race mostly found them difficult to comprehend. The troubles that repeatedly cropped up were boundlessly frustrating. It availed the Empire to leave Lander governance up to Landers as quickly as possible, but occupied land required some minding. The planets were abruptly cut off from the interstellar economy they'd been a part of until then. If the Empire didn't provide various forms of aid in the run up to the

planets' full incorporation into the imperial economy, it could very well inflict grave damage.

Furthermore, the current **Empire** was not what it once was. It had once been able to look after one or two hundred poverty-stricken **landworlds** without feeling burdened, while at the same time ruling over half of humanity. And if those planets refused to be introduced into the imperial economy, they could afford to be placid and collected about it indefinitely. But that was no longer anywhere close to an option. Discord on a level that'd never dawned on them as a possibility was arising. Such was the Empire's wretched state of affairs.

Yet Lafier had already resolved herself. So long as they were cutting their way into enemy territory, they would obviously need to govern societies that held the Empire in disfavor. Abliars saw themselves as born soldiers, and they never balked at the idea of staking their lives in order to enjoy a battle, but life could not be lived through edge-of-one's-seat excitement alone. To the Abh, and **Imperials** especially, the governance of **landworlds** was nothing more than after-party cleanup. There were many who had fun preparing for events, but only a rare few were keen on picking up after themselves afterwards.

"Yes, but in spite of that, we must endure in order to prevail."

"I am greatly obliged for your enlightening me as to this most profound truth, *Fiac*." *Lamlonh*'s lips curved into a smile. She was, of course, being sarcastic. "Now, I do suppose you are busy. Please do return to your mission."

"Right away." Lafier was totally relieved. She didn't need to be told by *Lamlonh*; she was busy in the extreme.

Normally, she would break into her workload starting with the formulation of the path of advance, but that was already settled. Still, that didn't mean she didn't have her work cut out for her. The first thing **Thunderpeal Fleet Command** should tackle was the **fleet's** composition.

When Lafier exited the **Abdicant's** Cabin, Sobash and Jint were there waiting for her atop a **transporter**, which she then mounted herself.

Moments after the **transporter** began moving, Sobash asked: "Was *Nisothe-Fanigar* in good spirits?"

"How could she be?" replied Lafier.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"You are? I didn't think the state of *Nisothe's* spirits would weigh on you."

"There's not a person alive who wishes to be aboard the same ship as an ill-humored Abliar, ma'am."

Lafier ignored that remark. That Sobash didn't add, "And to think there are *two* of them," was a testament to his mild-mannered nature.

"I'm thinking of dividing the fleet into six corps," Lafier told her **Chief of Staff**. "It will consist of adding the **Wesco Portal** blockade corps to the basic column. I wish to hear your opinion."

The "basic column" referred to **Star Forces'** traditional attack fleet formation. For some reason or other, the word "basic" was quite often synonymous with the word "attack" for the Star Forces. Generally speaking, it didn't even occur to **soldiers** that it could be otherwise, so it wasn't confusing or off-putting to them, and it had never been considered an issue.

The basic column was made up of the main troops plus the corps to their front, back, and sides, for a total of five separate corps. The front corps' main mission was reconnaissance-by-force. It infiltrated enemy territory in multi-ship (and sometimes single-ship) groupings, incurring immense risk. The two flank corps were tasked with defending against enemy side-fire and dealing with the occupied area in an adaptable, ad hoc manner. During any deciding engagement, these squads attended the battlefield in conjunction with the main force as much as possible. Finally, the rear corps had the important role of maintaining contact between the various troops on the frontlines and Central. It also carried out temporary governance of occupied territory and all sorts of logistics duties.

Lafier's idea was to station one corps in addition to the base five corps to the **Wesco Portal**.

"I see." Sobash smiled. "That is a solid proposal."

Which Lafier understood to mean it was *that* conservative of a proposal, but she had no intention of getting creative at a time like this.

"No objections, then?"

Sobash gave it some thought. "Might it behoove us to entrust the **Wesco Portal's** blockade to the rear corps?"

"Would it?"

"It would make things more flexible for us. In the unlikely event the invasion is seen from the **Wesco Portal**, we would have to send in the rear corps first."

"Would that not put too many responsibilities on the rear corps' shoulders?"

"How would you feel making the rear corps the main squad?"

Lafier was startled. She planned to follow **Star Forces'** tradition and take direct command of the center corps. "Are you telling me to command the rear corps?"

"Yes, ma'am," Sobash nodded. "I believe you might find it best to station the *glagac daca* (overall flagship) in the **Wesco Portal's** vicinity

and direct the operation while overlooking the entire field and grasping the bigger picture.”

“But then there would be oversights in my command.”

In **planar space**, communications took time. **Inter-bubble communications** using **space-time particles** could only be used at a very short range, and the rate of information transfer was glacial to boot. Ultimately, the fastest way to relay information was to convey it via small-scale vessels. As such, staying in an area far removed from the frontlines would make responding swiftly to shifts in the course of battle that much tougher.

“Might I suggest you deploy frontline commanders you can rely on?”

But Lafier wasn’t convinced. “Is there something wrong with me doing it?”

“*Glaharérh*, you are the **Crown Princess**. You are irreplaceable to the **Empire**.”

“Surviving on the frontlines is an essential quality of the **Emperor**.”

“I see,” Sobash nodded. “Far be it from me to lecture an Abliar as to the qualities the **Jade Throne** demands. However, I insist you should place **Fleet Command** near the **Wesco Portal**.”

“You’re speaking in purely military terms.”

“Yes, of course.”

“The endpoint of the attack is Nohv Kinshass. Their main star system.”

“I’m not unaware, ma’am. What do you mean to say?” he asked in a puzzled tone.

“I mean to say that it is the **Crown Princess** who must conquer it. It would be rude otherwise.”

Sobash let out a nonplussed sort of sigh and blinked. “That had not occurred to me, ma’am. So you believe that from a *political* standpoint, **Your Highness the Crown Princess** must be present.”

Lafier nodded.

“Forgive my presumptuousness,” said Jint, “I don’t mean to butt in even though I’m just an **adjutant**, but... I reckon the enemy probably doesn’t much care about that. My home planet was conquered by **His Majesty the Emperor** when he was **Crown Prince**, and I don’t remember the people of Martin thinking of it as an honor in any way.”

It’s just like Jint to misunderstand in that way, thought Lafier. “It’s not a question of whether or not the enemy cares. If we fail to pay them the respect that ought to be paid, it’s *we* who’ll feel ill at ease.”

To the Abh, the frontlines *were* where the next **Empress** ought to be. Or at least, that was what Lafier believed.

“I see.” But Jint didn’t seem convinced.

“**Kilo-Commander** Lynn,” whispered Sobash under his breath. “That is how Abliars see things. It’s not what the Abh generally consider as going without saying. Please don’t get the wrong idea.”

It looked as though Sobash and Lafier disagreed on this matter.

“The man is Abh,” she pointed out, taking umbrage.

“Of course, ma’am” said Sobash. “I fully acknowledge that. It’s just that our **Quartermaster Kilo-Commander** occasionally forgets that fact.”

“Oh, I’m all too aware of that habit of his myself. Did he get hit by that lapse again just now?”

“That is how it seemed to me, ma’am.”

“I didn’t just *forget* I’m Abh,” said Jint. But his tone wasn’t defensive. “I simply got another chance to see with my own eyes the diversity of Abh values, that’s all.”

The man really might not be a complete and total Abh just yet, thought Lafier forlornly.

The **Count of Hyde**, *Linn Ssynec Raucr Ghintec*, came from a checkered lineage. He was rare among Abh **nobles** in that he hailed from a **landworld**. Rarer still, it was such an isolated planet that he hadn’t even known of the Abh’s existence before *Dusanh* appeared commanding an armada. Furthermore, he had received his schooling on a separate **landworld** before enrolling in a **quartermaster academy**.

Jint had never possessed blue hair, and his forehead bore no *froch*. But more importantly, his very heart might be un-Abhlike. Jint’s heart was, to Lafier, at once the object of her affection and her distaste. Jint’s inner core bothered her, but this had not started here and now. She decided to ignore it. There were a myriad of things she needed to do.

“In any case, I shall be commanding the central corps,” declared Lafier.

“Duly noted, ma’am,” said Sobash. “Might we wish to keep the **Wesco Portal** blockade corps delinked, ma’am?”

“Weigh our options. Run a comparison between the five-corps and six-corps plan. I take it you can submit the results to me in twenty-four hours?”

“That will be possible, yes,” replied Sobash immediately.

“However, the less time spent on it, the less robust the analysis will be. If I were you, I would give it more time so as to throw the souls of a good number of soldiers and officers into it.”

“How about forty-eight hours, then?”

“It would still be far from flawless, but unfortunately, time is finite.”

“Can you make tradeoffs?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then make the decision in forty-eight hours.”

Sobash raised an eyebrow. “Is it okay for *us* to decide, ma’am?”

“With regards to everything to do with the basic formation, I accept the conclusions you and your officers draw. The same can’t be said with regards to who will be the commander.”

“We stand honored, ma’am.”

“Now then, get to it. You have forty-eight hours starting now.”

“Roger that.” Sobash bowed respectfully before calling for another **transporter** and transferring.

Lafier and Jint were left alone on the first **transporter**.

“What does my schedule look like now?” asked Lafier.

“It’s eleven hours, thirty-seven minutes of rest.”

“Rest?”

“Is something not to your satisfaction?”

“No, it’s nothing. It’s just...” She felt guilty making her subordinates work while she took a break.

“I can insert work time for you, *Glaharérh*,” he said, before adding under his breath: “But I’ve got a whole lotta work for you later, so I think you should take this time to get in some shut-eye. I dunno any Abh lullabies, but I still remember some Martinese ones. I could sing to you by your bedside if you like, Lafier.”

“You **idiot**.” A mite offended, Lafier looked at Jint’s face. Then she couldn’t take her eyes off it.

He’s aged.

The Abh were unaging. Their bodies stopped physically aging in their twenties, after which they stayed the same in both appearance and bodily functionality. And yet, Lafier had been familiar with aging from an early age. Many of the **servant vassals** of the **Royal House of Clybh** were Landers. In fact, Landers who could be called elderly were not at all uncommon. She had grown up waited on by them. And after entering the military, she made the acquaintance of **soldiers and personnel** who came from **landworlds**. Almost all **NCCs** were Landers, for one. There were, of course, no elderly Landers among them, but Landers older than Jint were commonplace.

She was not yet, however, used to witnessing time tick away on the body of someone she had known since youth.

According to imperial law, Jint was Abh, but biology did not agree. Landers who’d evolved without genetic tampering on Earth and Abhs who had been genetically modified to travel the stars differed on the species level.

Jint was only a year older than Lafier, but they appeared to be further apart in age. At present, they were still in the could-be-taken-

for-siblings range, albeit only barely. But eventually, he would enter the could-be-taken-for-her-father range, then the grandfather range.

On that subject, instances whereby Jint treated her like some kind of child were growing more frequent. It was a joke he made all the time in the past, too, but it'd gotten excessive as of late. She imagined it might be because of her unchanging appearance. Perhaps Jint unconsciously fancied himself her older brother. Would he eventually start behaving like her father? Her grandfather?

Of course, there was no guarantee either of them would get to live that long. The Empire was in the midst of a struggle for its destiny, after all.

Lafier wordlessly touched Jint's cheek.

"What?" Jint looked confused.

That expression reminded her of when they were just a girl and a boy.

"It's nothing."

Jint chuckled a little and softly held the hand on his cheek. "It's okay, Lafier. I'm still plenty young by Lander standards, too. Did you know Landers are longer-lived than cats?"

"**Idiot**," she repeated. "I'm leaning toward having you sing me that lullaby, Jint."

Jint grew visibly flustered. "That was just a joke, Lafier."

"I know that. It's your punishment for your stupid joke."

"I beg **Your Highness's** forgiveness."

"Wrong way to apologize."

Jint grinned broadly. "Right, yeah. Sorry, Lafier."

Chapter 7: The Thunderpeal Fleet

Training Fleet 3 was distributed over more than twenty *zobairh* (harbors). This was not done because it was called for by the operation; there was simply no one harbor that could accommodate the entire fleet. Of course, there were no constraints when it came to available space. That said, the **Star Forces** unfortunately didn't currently have enough ships to fill up a whole star system. The limiting factor was the production rate of **antimatter fuel**, which was consumed in large quantities by combat and combat exercises.

As a general rule, each harbor was designated as a **domain** — that is, a star system lacking an inhabited planet. And since they did not have **landworlds** to support, they made a sizable surplus of **antimatter fuel**. Even more **mobile antimatter fuel factories** were planned and installed. Still, no single star system had the capacity to provide for all of the **fleets** under Lafier's command.

It was during the finishing stages that **Fleet 3** amassed as a corps. The voyage to the *Lymscorh Éüdor* was the first and last action **Training Fleet 3** ever took as a group. **Training Fleet 3** was reborn as the **Thunderpeal Fleet** at the *Lymscorh Éüdor*, after which it was to migrate to the *Chtymec Spautnébrybr* (Spohtnebryoov Astrobase). The **planar space** side of the *Saudec Spautnébrybr* (Spohtnebryoov Portal), which was situated at the **astrobase**, was fairly close to the **Wesco Portal**. And on the **3-space** side of the Wesco Portal lay the **Abliar Countdom**, and Lahkfacar within it — both in enemy hands.

The **Empire** had never made the transfer of the capital official, so even now, Lahkfacar was still nominally the **imperial capital**. The eight **astrobases** were stationed to protect the capital, but now they served as the first line of defense against an incursion *from* the capital. Of course, they could also serve as bases for recapturing it.

If the enemy detected the fleet moving to the **Spohtnebryoov Astrobase**, the enemy might concentrate its forces in Lahkfacar. The **Star Forces** hoped that if that did come to pass, the PSSU's defenses would weaken as troops were drawn away from it. When the fleet parted with the **Mobile Imperial Palace** and left the *Lymscorh Éüdor*, the troops had yet to be organized. Although it had already been decided, the announcement was made in the middle of the move.

In the end, it was the five-corps plan that was adopted, and the formation consisted of *Byrec Casna Raudrochotr* (Thunderpeal Fleet 1)

to **Fleet 5**.

The allocation of ships was decided nigh automatically — analyses had been run more than a handful of times in advance. However, because **Fleet 5** would be tasked with watching over and guarding the **Wesco Portal** in addition to resupplying the whole armada, extra units were incorporated. The **staff officers** were bombarded by the work that came with this.

The officers also had to arrange for the migration of the fleet's various corps. Suitable resupply points had to be posted in between the *Lymscorh Éúdor* and the **Spohtnebryoov Astrobase**. Of course, the existing facilities would be utilized, but they alone wouldn't be enough. The necessary fuel was secured by a combination of transferring fuel from the star systems outside the route in advance and stationing **mobile antimatter fuel factories**. Reshuffling **mobile antimatter fuel factories** was also important. The factories at the harbors would become unnecessary, so one might think it would be prudent to use them as resupply points, but it wouldn't work out timewise. As such, fuel would be supplied from other star systems, and the amount that was lacking would be covered by the surplus at the harbors.

Of course, the answer would be worked out by **compucrystals**, but it was humans who needed to think about what needed answering. That was because it was not the **Thunderpeal** or **Training Fleets** that were responsible for the arrangement of **antimatter fuel** and its production equipment, but rather the *Byrec Casobair* (Carrier Fleet).

The **Carrier Fleet** maintained and developed shipping routes, with both the Empire's economy and overall defense in mind. Following the taking of the capital, they devoted themselves to rebuilding those routes, just as the **Training Fleet** strove to rebuild the **Star Forces'** war power. If the **Training Fleet** could be likened to equipment the Empire used to regain its muscle mass, then the **Carrier Fleet** was the equipment it used to repair its body.

The **Training Fleet** yielded successful results, and in the end, it created a combat corps called the **Thunderpeal Fleet**. However, the **Carrier Fleet's** mission was still in its early stages. The **Abliar Countdom**, the star system that contained Lahkfacar, had been more than just the Empire's distribution center. **Space-time bubble generators** were necessary to cross **planar space**, yet it was once the only system in the Empire that produced them. It would take tremendous amounts of effort to fill that hole. As such, Lafier figured it made more sense to recapture Lahkfacar, but the **Emperor** seemed not to agree.

In any case, the **Carrier Fleet** wanted the **antimatter fuel**

factories provided to the **Training Fleet** harbors to be returned without delay. They had all manner of uses.

Glagamh Byrer Casobair (Carrier Fleet Command) had apparently reported to the Emperor that a counteroffensive would be premature. Needless to say, from the moment the Emperor's edict went into effect, they too hoped **Operation Thunderpeal** was a success. But that didn't mean they had any intention of acquiescing to the **Thunderpeal Fleet's** demands all too readily.

The staff officers had to spend some of their time in these sorts of negotiations. If the discussions didn't lead anywhere, they'd be unable to formulate adequate plans.

Carrier Fleet Command always acted in tandem with the **Mobile Imperial Palace**, so it was in the *Lymscorh Éüdor* at present. Naturally, the **Thunderpeal Fleet's** staff intended to get negotiations with the **Carrier Fleet** over with while they were still in *Éüdoc*. To be fair, **Carrier Fleet Command** did cooperate. Yet they still ran out of time, and some of the staff members remained in the **viscountdom**.

Lafier had a different job on her plate: personnel affairs.

It seemed as though **Chief of Staff** Sobash was still operating under the delusion that the *Glaharérh Byrer Raudrochotr* (Thunderpeal Fleet Commander-in-Chief), i.e. Lafier, could and should be given direct command over **Fleet 5**. She had to hurry to fill the *Glaharérh Byrer Ghuta* (Fleet 5 Commander-in-Chief) role, not least in order to foil that little scheme.

What was formerly **Training Fleet 3** had seven *glagamh fecá* (secondary command centers), each headed by a **vice commander-in-chief**, and each supplied with squadrons under their direct control and **staff officers**. They were prepared to execute the commands of the fleet at any time. Their main mission was strategy research, but they also served as the **command centers** of the "enemy forces" during combat exercises. The **Thunderpeal Fleet** inherited all seven **secondary command centers**. In essence, the secondary command centers moved laterally to the command centers of the newly incorporated numbered fleets.

The **vice commanders-in-chief** had a ranking order. And considering the importance of the **Fleet 5 Commander-in-Chief** position, it was the *Boalmroi Glaharérh* (Most Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief) that ought to be assigned to it.

The **patrol ship** *Hairlath*, upon which rode the **Most Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief** of the fleet formerly known as **Training Fleet 3** and now known as the **Thunderpeal Fleet**, came alongside the **flagship** *Clybnochec*. And the *Boalmroi Glaharérh Byrer Raudrochotr* (Thunderpeal Fleet Most Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief) who transferred from the *Hairlath* to the *Clybnochec* was none other than

the **Archduchess of Laitpanh** **Star Forces Admiral Sporr Aronn Saicsepatr Painaigh**.

When Sporr appeared at the room of the **Commander-in-Chief** of the *Clybnochec*, she didn't bother hiding her displeasure: "Ma'am, are you telling me to take command of the *rear* forces? *Me*?"

"Correct." *Why is everyone so disgruntled*, thought a fed-up Lafier as she nodded. *The fighting is finally starting again!* "I'd also like you to defend the **Wesco Portal**."

"I'm on defense?" Sporr furrowed her brow.

"Do you object?" asked Lafier outright. "I am entrusting you with our lifeline here. I don't believe a **Star Forces admiral** should feel above that."

"Oh, I would never entertain objecting, ma'am." Sporr flashed a smile and lightly bowed. "I receive my appointment as *Glaharéhr Byrer Ghuta Raudrochotr* (Thunderpeal Fleet 5 Commander-in-Chief) with humility and respect."

"I see. Please do." Relieved, Lafier shot a glance at the nearby **Chief of Staff** Sobash. With this, he would have to abandon his plot to make **Fleet 5** the main company.

Just as Lafier was accompanied by Sobash, Sporr had taken her own **Chief of Staff, Commodore** Cfadiss, with her.

"Well, I suppose that task is suited to the likes of a **Star Forces admiral**," Sporr grumbled to Cfadiss in a voice too loud to be called a whisper. "It is far below the **Archduchess of Laitpanh**."

"But ma'am," said Cfadiss, an expression of resignation on his face, "As **Her Highness** stated, it's recognized as the second highest position in the **Thunderpeal Fleet**. Would I be amiss in assuming you would like to be the **Fleet 1 Commander-in-Chief** instead?"

"That sounds like more fun, don't you think?"

"And that's why it's not a good match for a **Star Forces admiral**. **Your Excellency's** rank would decrease. Besides, you've already served in that role."

"And it entertained me, so I'd like to do it again."

"Please don't be so self-indulgent, ma'am. And just think — if our orders are revised and we're tasked with retaking the capital using the **Wesco Portal** as a base, our forces will become the advance guard."

"My, my." Sporr's crimson eyes betrayed her keen interest. "Is there a plan like that in the works?"

"Oh no, ma'am. I'm just stating a possibility," said Cfadiss. "How could I be aware of a plan that **Your Excellency** isn't?"

"You have a point." Sporr sighed. "If it means being entrusted with the vanguard recon corps, I don't mind getting demoted. I'll still be the **Archduchess of Laitpanh**, after all. No matter how high-ranking any fleet position may be, even the highest is only ever

commensurate to a mere Abliar.”

“Excuse me, *Lonh*,” said Sobash, clearly amused. “Are you aware that you are still in the presence of *Fiac Glaharérr*?”

“Heavens me,” said Sporr, not fazed in the least. “No Abliar worth their salt would pay the jests of a Sporr any mind. I mean no disrespect when I say that I have known **Her Highness** since she was a child, and that you can take it from me she is *unmistakably* an Abliar.”

Lafier didn’t get the feeling she was being praised, but it didn’t rub her the wrong way, either. In fact, the way Sobash nodded and said “I see” was more wounding.

“What do you mean, ‘you see’?” Lafier asked her **Chief of Staff**.

“I was just thinking this must be how people of the Imperial Palace socialize,” replied Sobash.

“How could you think that?” Lafier was growing yet more annoyed.

Sporr rose up. “Indeed. I am glad that I was able to confirm that, though the capital is now lost, the relationship between the **Imperial Family** and my clan has not changed. Come to think of it, I hear that relations between the Sporr and the Abliars have been like this since *before* Abhkind settled in Lahkfacar.”

“**Archduchess**,” said Lafier, unable to restrain herself, “the **capital** is not ‘lost.’ It’s still right within our reach. We’ll take it back shortly.”

“It was a slip of the tongue,” said Sporr, bowing her head deeply. A smile was curving her lips, though. “Though I *was* beginning to tire of being shined on by a sun by the name of ‘Abliar.’”

After Sporr excused herself, the **Baroness of Febdash, Grand Commodore Atausryac Ssynec Atausr Lauïc**, was summoned. She too was one of the **Vice Commanders-in-Chief**.

“*Fiac*.” With a slightly awkward carriage, the **Grand Commodore** bowed.

An odd twist of fate had brought them together — it was Lafier who had killed Atosryua’s brother, yet Atosryua was her direct superior when Lafier was given her first ship to command.

Sobash offered her a seat: “**Vice Commander-in-Chief**, this way, if you please.”

He too had a history with Atosryua, having once served as her **Chief of Staff**.

It was no coincidence that many of Lafier’s subordinates were **starpilots** she had known and interacted with since times past. The **Star Forces**, vast though they were, only had a limited number of high-ranking **starpilots**. One of the reasons each of those high-ranking **starpilots** knew a lot of others was simply that they’d had occasion to

meet at least once. But even more saliently, it was also the result of the deliberate designs of the **Council of Abdicants**.

To **gentry**, becoming a **starpilot** was a right and a privilege. To **Imperials** and **nobility**, it was an obligation. For **nobles**, they simply couldn't inherit their **noble rank** without having put in military service. Moreover, when they did get ordained, they did not then have any particularly severe obligations imposed on them. Their duty to the military ended once they reached the rank of **Deca-Commander**. There were **nobles** like the **Archduchess of Laitpanh** who remained in the military even after inheriting their **noble rank**, but they were not being forced to by the Empire.

It was different for **Imperials**. To them, military service was a race among rivals to the **crown**. They were duty-bound to display their own merit, ability, and competence and rise up the ranks.

In the **Humankind Empire of Abh**, the most important of the **Emperor's** duties was commanding the military. Lafier had never asked herself why such a race was necessary. To her, it was such a matter of course that she had never thought about what the point of it was.

The Abh progenitors were created as bio-droid “components” that powered a multi-generational spacecraft. Eventually, the founders betrayed their creators and began to recognize themselves as humans. However, although that multi-generational spacecraft became the city-ship **Abliar**, it was still essentially the Abh's whole world, and so they were forced to maintain the bio-droid aspect of themselves. The Abh only cut clean from their bio-droid drudgery when the Empire was founded, which was when their world suddenly expanded from the confines of the city-ship. Nevertheless, the **Abliar** stuck around as the **Imperial Palace**. Perhaps it could be said that only members of the **Imperial Family**, the Abliars, continued to be bio-droid components of a larger machine — which was not referring, of course, to the Imperial Palace, but rather to the Empire.

During the Fall of Lahkfacar, the Imperial Palace was converted into the **Dragon Egg Fortress**, and essentially became no more. However, the Abliar Clan continued to regard themselves as components of the Empire. To Abliars, the purpose of life was to become a more perfect gear in the Empire's workings. They could take their time thinking about other things in life *after* they fulfilled their roles. There were a rare few **Imperials** who gave up on chasing the **emperorship** early. Life didn't become harsher for them afterward, but they gave up as a result of determining that their ability was not high enough to shoulder the Empire. There was a tendency among the Abhs to believe in themselves to excessive levels, and the Abliars were said to be the most “Abhlike” clan. That was not to say modest Abliars

were never born. Unfortunately, Lafier was an Abliar through and through — she didn't doubt her own skill in the slightest.

The race for the **throne** was also a time for gaining confidants and trusted friends. It was a necessity of military service to be able to pick out capable personnel who would make for reliable and competent vassals in the future. In fact, that in itself was part of the competition, and a very important element of it at that.

Consequently, a diverse variety of human resources were posted around **starpilots** who were **Imperials**. It went without saying that officers with good academic records were selected, but so too were those with unusual experiences. Occasionally, the **Council of Abdicants** secretly pulled strings and sent in **soldiers and personnel** they thought would contribute to the growth of one or more **Imperials**. Atosryua was, in all likelihood, placed in Lafier's vicinity intentionally.

But none of that mattered anymore. Lafier trusted Atosryua as a **soldier**. She was an outstanding **starpilot** who had gained lots of valuable experience since the war broke out. If Lafier hadn't been an **Imperial**, she wouldn't have outstripped her in terms of **military rank**.

"I want to entrust you with the vanguard recon corps," said Lafier.

The **Fleet 1 Commander-in-Chief** position that Sporr wanted was thus given to Atosryua.

"It's a great honor," replied Atosryua. "I am pleased to accept it. It's a shame I can't tell my father and brother about this. My father would have burst out laughing."

"Er, what do you mean, 'burst out laughing'?" Lafier asked her former superior officer.

"From joy, of course."

"I see."

Lafier had met the second Baron of Febdash, Atosryua's father. In fact, they had once fought on the same ship. It was only the one time, but he could be called a comrade, and there was no doubt he had helped save her life. He was also killed in action during the Fall of Lahkfacar.

While Lafier never interacted much with the second **Baron of Febdash**, Jint and others were very fond of him and his personality. It was hard to believe somebody Jint esteemed and admired would laugh at his daughter's promotion. However, she decided not to pursue the matter.

Lafier had not gained right-hand officers befitting her status and **military rank**. There was more than one reason she was considered the ad hoc **Crown Princess**, and the fact that her competence was an unknown quantity was just the most important of those reasons.

Another was that she had too few confidants to support her in the event she did accede to the **Jade Throne**. If this were peacetime, that would simply mean she would get farther away from the **Throne** and cede her position in the race to another, worthier **Imperial**. Unfortunately for the Empire, however, there was no better candidate for Emperor than Lafier in terms of talent and skill. That was due to the unusual situation engendered by the Fall of the Capital and the partial destruction of the **Star Forces**.

As such, Lafier decided to leave **Fleets 2 and 4** to people she was not very familiar with. Meanwhile, The **Fleet 1** and **Fleet 5** *Glaharérh* were given a great deal of discretionary power. They would be too distant from the main forces to ask for orders for every little thing. On the other hand, the *Glaharérh* **Fleets 2 and 4**, which were to protect both flanks of the main forces, had very little scope to exercise any sort of discretion.

She could make adventurous decisions when it came to personnel affairs. If they were no good, she could replace them on a dime. Lafier decided to designate **Commodore Pianzaicec** (Pianzehk) the *Glaharérh* *Byrer Mata* (Fleet 2 Commander-in-Chief) and **Commodore Dasemh** (Dasehf) the *Glaharérh* *Byrer Gona* (Fleet 4 Commander-in-Chief). Both were *Roï Glaharérh Byrer Claiïar* (Training Fleet Vice Commanders-in-Chief), so she had already made their acquaintance.

That being said, they had become **Vice Commanders-in-Chief** extremely recently, and Lafier hadn't met them before they did. From what she could tell from her erstwhile superior officers' evaluations, there was nothing to criticize regarding competence, but she couldn't trust such reports unconditionally. There was still not enough data for Lafier to make definitive assessments.

Commodore Pianzehk had moved from the *Bhosorh* (Military Administration Base) to take his new post. It seemed he had spent his career primarily in the field of military administration. Many expected him to become the **Military Administration Director** in the future. For that reason, he needed to spend some time working on the frontlines.

When Pianzehk appeared before Lafier, he appeared a tad nervous. "I stand humbled," he said, in a very formal register.

He was the youngest of the **Vice Commanders-in-Chief**, but he was still older than Lafier. Pianzehk seemed deeply moved when she told him that she wanted to leave **Fleet 2** to him.

"I am truly honored. I will exert myself to the utmost in service."

Lafier was relieved he reacted as she'd hoped.

"Right," said Lafier. "We expect great things."

Commodore Dasehf being entrusted with **Fleet 4** was an internal **Training Fleet** promotion; apparently, he had spent most of his

military career as an **instructor**. His previous job was as a *casariac ùaréicotr* (teacher staff officer) in the **Nursery Fleet**, i.e. **Training Fleet 1**. Physical aging was a thing of the past for the Abh, so even the Abh themselves had trouble telling how old other Abhs were by outward appearance. To Lafier, Dasehf looked like a boy who was right on the verge of adolescence, or in other words, around the time when the rate of growth began to slow down, in the mid-teens. Yet he was the oldest of the **Vice Commanders-in-Chief**, and in that way the opposite of Pianzehk. The Abhs' relative maturity was not manifest in their appearances but rather in their demeanor.

"Congratulations on your new post, *Glaharérh*." He bowed, the picture of calm.

"Thanks," said Lafier.

"Pianzehk just told me he became **Fleet 2 Commander-in-Chief**," said Dasehf, "so I suppose you will be granting me **Fleet 4**, ma'am."

"That's correct."

Dasehf beamed. "I humbly accept."

"We're counting on you," Lafier nodded. "Are you friends with **Commodore** Pianzehk?"

"He is a former pupil of mine, ma'am. One moment, I find we have the same **rank**, and the next, I find that even our job descriptions are the same."

"Is that a tricky position for you to be in?"

"Perish the thought," said Dasehf, smiling precociously. "Why, it would not bother me one bit if **Your Highness** was an old pupil of mine."

Chapter 8: The Spohtnebryoov Astrobase

The **Thunderpeal Fleet** required eighty-one hours to pass through the *Saudec Spautnébrybr* (Spohtnebryoov Portal).

By the time the rearmost squadron arrived at the **Spohtnebryoov Astrobase**, **Fleet 1** (led by **Grand Commodore** Atosryua) had already departed for the People's Sovereign Stellar Union's sphere of influence. They were truly caught in a whirlwind of work.

However, the main forces of the **Thunderpeal Fleet** planned to stay at the **Spohtnebryoov Astrobase** for a while longer. That was because they had to wait for groups of ships that had yet to arrive, and it was also to daunt enemy forces lurking in Lahkfacar.

The **Spohtnebryoov Astrobase** was a star system with a yellow dwarf at its center. All astrobases, without exception, sported lovely **landworlds** where **NCCs** could recharge their batteries. The second planet in the system, *Bohaimh*, was that landworld, and the *Bandhorh Chtymer* (Astrobase Headquarters) revolved around it.

On the side of *Bohaimh*'s orbit closer to the sun, an elliptical band of debris had formed. That was where the **Astrobase's** industrial plants were concentrated. In preparation for the upcoming battles, the maintenance yard had been expanded, with **antimatter fuel factories** getting built one after the other. The completed **fuel factories** were sent to an orbital path closer to the star of Spohtnebryoov. The majority of the **Thunderpeal Fleet** was moored in the orbit where the **fuel factories** were being held.

However, the **flagship** *Clybnochec* was in orbit around the planet *Bohaimh*, and had come right alongside the **Astrobase Headquarters**.

In the **Commander's Bridge** of the *Glagac Byrer Raudrochotr* (Thunderpeal Fleet Flagship) *Clybnochec*, a meeting was taking place. In addition to the fleet's leadership, the **Astrobase's staff officers** were participating via hologram.

"These are the present developments in the **Wesco Portal** area," said the **Spohtnebryoov's Information Staff Officer**. A **planar space map** was projected on the floor.

It's so frustrating, thought Lafier, who stared at the **Wesco Portal** situated at the center of the map.

The **Wesco Portal** was one of the eight portals of Lahkfacar. In **planar space**, it was within hailing distance of the **Spohtnebryoov**

Portal, and if one were to pass through it, they would emerge to find the sun that bore Lafier's **surname**, and the **capital** that revolved around it.

*How has that bunch of boors changed the **orbital city** that prospered as the Empire's core for so many centuries?* Whenever Lafier thought about that, she could feel her chest constrict, and sometimes she even felt suffocated. She would get seized by the sensation that her composure was eroding, and by the desire to just scream, no matter what nonsense came out of her mouth. She was dying to retake the capital.

There was no way anybody without *frocragh* could love and appreciate the sheer enchantment that pervaded the city. Lafier hoped against hope that the enemy at least didn't add to the destruction that marred Lahkfacar after that fierce battle, but she knew they must be trying to reconstruct it in some half-cocked fashion, and that some tacky, hideous facilities were getting mixed in with the structures of Lahkfacar proper.

Lahkfacar was Lafier's birthplace, and it wasn't just hers; the majority of Abhkind was born there. But right now, in **Training Fleet 1**, a generation that had never known Lahkfacar was growing up. And if the Empire didn't hurry, they would become the majority.

But she had to switch gears and think about something else. The mission she had been given was to invade someplace else while staring sidelong at the entrance to Abhkind's beloved **capital**.

The **Wesco Portal** was surrounded by symbols that denoted the enemy.

"From the looks of it, it's extremely crowded," said Lafier.

"It is, ma'am," nodded the **Information Officer**. "The enemy fleet is highly active. I will draw a comparison between it and the records we have of their movements three years ago."

Symbols and numbers danced across the floor. No words of explanation were needed. As the **Thunderpeal Fleet** neared the **Spohntnebryoov Astrobase**, the enemy's war power kept increasing. It was clear to see that the enemy was on guard against the Empire retaking Lahkfacar.

"Can we consider the diversion a success then?"

"Unfortunately, we have not yet confirmed whether there are PSSU **fleets** in the **Wesco Portal** area."

It would be convenient for the Empire if this amassing of forces came at the expense of protecting the PSSU, but the Astrobase didn't yet know whence these troops had emerged. Their enemy was the **Four Nations Alliance**. The fleets could be from the United Humankind, or the Greater Alkont Republic, or the Hania Federation, or any combination thereof.

“Next, the activity of the PSSU will be displayed,” stated the **Information Officer**.

The screen shifted to a different mode.

“The quantity is increasing, but the quality is decreasing,” continued the Officer.

“You mean the number of elite troops has gone down?” asked Lafier.

“Yes, ma’am. So far, we have not identified any elite-level troops deployed in this area. Here is a list of the troops that can be identified at present.”

A chart rose up in midair.

“It’s based on what was observed thirty days ago. In blue are the troops whose positions used to be identified but whose current whereabouts are unknown. In yellow are those whose past and present positions are known. In red are the new and additional troops.”

The corps that disappeared contained state-of-the-art ships, while the newly appearing corps were composed of old-model ships. The number of ships had increased overall, but their relative war potential had nevertheless decreased.

“Might it be possible that they have forces or firepower we have yet to grasp?” asked Sobash.

“The chances of that are exceedingly low, sir,” said the **Information Officer** confidently.

Lafier had no interest in the source of the **Information Officer**’s confidence. This was the first time they had met, but she knew that he and his subordinates were experts at information analysis, and that was enough for her.

She was, however, interested in something else: “Is there any intelligence as to the destination of the elite troops that disappeared?”

“The intelligence is very indeterminate, but we believe they are amassing their forces in Habameri.”

It was known that the *Cüioth Habamerir* (Habameri Star System) contained a major PSSU military base.

Afterward, a back-and-forth transpired regarding the details of PSSU military deployment. The **Thunderpeal Fleet** asked all the questions, the Astrobase replied to them, and so the discussion wiled on.

“That clears up all of our questions,” said Sobash.

“Good work, team,” she told the *casariac Chtymer* (Astrobase staff officers).

The **Astrobase officers**’ holograms bowed and vanished.

“It doesn’t look as though the plan of operations will need to undergo any major changes,” said Sobash.

“I suppose our sights are set on Habameri first,” said Lafier.

“Yes, ma’am. We will, if possible, exterminate the enemy’s main forces and break their will to continue fighting.”

“If the enemy’s main forces are annihilated,” said **Fleet 5 Commander-in-Chief Star Forces Admiral Sporr**, “will those fine folks throw up their hands and surrender without a fuss?”

With the exception of **Fleet 1 Commander-in-Chief Grand Commodore Atosryua**, who had already left the **astrobase**, the **Commanders-in-Chief of Fleets 2, 4, and 5** and their respective **Chiefs of Staff** participated in the meeting.

It was not Sobash who replied, but rather the **Fleet 4 Commander-in-Chief, Commodore Dasehf**: “I believe we can place our confidence in that possibility.”

“What makes you so certain, *Lonh*?”

Lafier reckoned that the reason Sporr looked so puzzled was that she wasn’t expecting him to be the one to reply. For her part, Lafier didn’t feel it was odd in any way. Dasehf was well-versed when it came to the internal affairs of their enemy nations. Though the fleet had officers in charge of information regarding the enemy military, it didn’t have anyone whose mission it was to know information that was a rung higher — which was to say, the enemy nations’ politics, economic systems, and societal structures.

The Empire had an organ whose specialty lay in accruing and analyzing general information as to the enemy nations, but it didn’t really come up much at the **Fleet Command** level. That information was put to use by Central for high-level diplomacy and war strategy. The fleets were just there to silently carry out the operations that Central decided on.

That being said, Dasehf was more informed about the enemy nations’ circumstances than his professional duties required him to be. It was apparently a subject of some fascination to him, and he seemed to adore talking about it. Lafier hadn’t worked with him for very long at all, but she was painfully aware of that tendency of his.

“It can be said that among our enemies, the PSSU’s structure is the closest to the **Empire**’s. Each star system has an exceedingly high degree of independence. With only a handful of exceptions, they can mostly operate self-sufficiently. The majority of PSSU systems won’t be in dire straits if they’re cut off from other systems. For a political structure like that, there’s nary any point to having a federal government. For all intents and purposes, that federal government exists to maintain the military. The functionaries of the federal government are predominantly composed of military personnel. If the military fell to ruin, the federal government would lose its sole purpose.”

“I seem to recall it *not* being a military regime,” said Sporr.

“The PSSU budget appears to rely on contributions from each individual star system’s government, so they can’t defy the decisions made by the legislative bodies. Interestingly enough, military service running down family lines is prohibited there. If either parent is military personnel, they can’t enlist. To be exact, the children of federal government officials can’t become federal government officials themselves. In that regard, they’re *very* different from the **Empire**.”

“How interesting,” said Sporr, though it couldn’t be clearer that was just a polite but perfunctory interjection.

“As such, all of the officers of the enemy military come from non-military families,” he continued. If Sporr’s thinly veiled disinterest bothered him, he certainly didn’t show it. “And those families live on **landworlds**. They’re the ones who work every day and pay for the war funds. It’s a bizarre relationship, in a way. Sometimes I find myself thinking of their fleets as a beast kept on a leash. Bearing their history in mind, I feel as though that beast is lurking somewhere out of sight, just waiting for a blink-and-it’s-gone window of opportunity to bite our windpipe.”

“You put it very poetically, *Lonh*. The problem is there’s more than one ‘beast’ protecting the PSSU.”

“We have determined that that too is nothing to be concerned over. The PSSU borders our **Empire**, the Hania Federation, and the United Humankind, but we have the corridor connecting it and the UH almost entirely blockaded. Any large-scale fleet movement there is next to impossible. Of course, they might conceivably be capable of sending in reinforcements going by way of the Greater Alkont Republic, but considering their present war potential, that seems far from likely. That leaves the Hania Federation as a possibility, but in light of the behavioral patterns evident in their history, they will probably expend every effort to fortify their own nation’s defenses. They will need to make provisions for the **Skeer Monarchy**. They will also, of course, surmise that our goal is **Skeer** in short order. They will predict that, should **Operation Thunderpeal** prove successful, the pressure coming from the direction of **Skeer** will grow steadily more formidable. If so, then they will preserve their assets in case that comes to pass. They won’t go out of their way to travel to other nations. If allied nations attempt to pass through their sphere of influence in order to rescue the PSSU, they might even get detained. The reasoning being along the lines of: ‘If you’re going to go save them, then lend us a hand and protect us, too.’ Allied forces may already be stationed in the PSSU sphere of influence, but it’s difficult to imagine there will be any additional aid beyond that. At base, the PSSU will have to resist us unassisted.”

“It seems **Military Command** thinks so as well,” said Lafier. She

wanted this topic of conversation to come to a close.

"I'm delighted to hear that," said Sporr. "We're just going to stay here and house-sit the area, after all. I want this tedious business to be over with."

Lafier didn't bother lecturing her by saying "this is an important mission" or the like. Sporr would find it entertaining, but Lafier had no desire to be her jester. Not only did Sporr have a much longer career in the military than she did, but she was indisputably a **soldier** par excellence. She was already totally aware of the importance of her mission. Sporr wasn't looking down on the task she had been given. She simply didn't like it.

Besides, Sporr wasn't the only one who wanted to get this operation over with quickly. Lafier did too. If they managed to subjugate the PSSU, then for the next operation, they could make a case to be sent to the Lahkfacar they so longed to retake.

They had to be more than just fast, of course. They had to fulfill the objectives of the operation with minimal damage to the fleet.

"Can the strategy be revised in six hours' time?" asked Lafier.

"Yes ma'am," nodded Sobash.

"Are there any changes to the orders given to **Fleet 1**?"

"No ma'am."

"Then no one will mind if the sortie is launched as scheduled."

"No ma'am."

"In that case," said Lafier, rising to her feet, "there's no need to prolong this meeting. I thank you all for your hard work. Now, everyone resume preparing for the attack."

The **soldiers and personnel** there also stood up, and saluted.

Chapter 9: *Raïchacarh Üécr Sauder Fanbor* (Clash at the Fahnbo Portal-Sea)

Fleet 1 of the **Thunderpeal Fleet**, a vanguard recon corps, was made up of nine **recon sub-fleets**, and those **sub-fleets** were lined up along the border with the PSSU.

Unlike their landworld counterparts, “borders” in **planar space** were extremely fuzzy and ambiguous. In practice, they were not lines but rather whole surfaces of significant breadth. Virtually none of the **portals** scattered around that area were in use. Of course, the percentage of **portals** that were used as gateways in and out of star systems was extremely slight to begin with. It was just that that tendency was even more marked in those “border” areas.

In one of those portals, *Saudec Bibaurdandana Buser* (*Busec Portal 3077*), lurked the **recon sub-fleet** that was under the direct command of the *Glaharérh Byrer Casna Raudrochotr* (Thunderpeal Fleet 1 Commander-in-Chief). That sub-fleet’s name was the *Arlaitec*. The PSSU actually claimed possession over *Busec Portal 3077*, and the **Empire** hadn’t objected to that claim.

One might ask whether that meant **Fleet 1** had already executed the invasion of PSSU, but that wasn’t the case. Just because the **Empire** hadn’t objected didn’t mean it had ever acknowledged the claim as valid. The Empire was not in the habit of nailing down what nation each of the **portals** situated in remote regions belonged to, as this was of no use to the Empire.

In **3-space**, the closest star to *Busec Portal 3077* was 3.7 light-years away. Moreover, that star had no planets. The **sub-fleet** was accompanied by **mobile antimatter fuel factories** that converted stellar light into antiprotons and positrons, but operating those here would be meaningless.

A **patrol ship** of the *Arlaitec* was circling *Busec Portal 3077*, the phosphorescent orb glowing dimly amidst the darkness.

On the **Commander’s Bridge** of the **patrol ship** *Beunerath*, the **flagship** of the **recon sub-fleet** *Arlaitec* as well as the *Glagac Byrer Casna Raudrochotr* (Thunderpeal Fleet 1 Flagship)...

“The scheduled time has come,” reported the **Chief of Staff**, **Associate Commodore Bobgamh**.

“Then shall we begin?” said the **Commander-in-Chief, Grand Commodore** Atosryua. “All ships, **set sail!**”

The group of **patrol ships** rushed toward *Busec Portal 3077*.

They knew that the enemy had likely picked up on the *Arlaitec*’s activity to some extent. They tried moving sluggishly like a transport corps would, so as not to reveal themselves as a **recon sub-fleet**, but they were unsure this ruse succeeded.

The first target of the corps directly commanded by Atosryua had been designated as the *Cüoth Fanbor* (Fahnbo Star System). The system had been maintained by the PSSU as a frontier-region supply base. It had a semi-populated landworld, with large-scale **antimatter fuel factories** and simple repair stations among the facilities installed.

They would first seize Fahnbo and make it a strategic base. **Fleet 1**’s mission was simply to act as a scouting party, but for a large-scale operation like this one, a base of operations in enemy territory was necessary. According to prior intel, Fahnbo’s **antimatter fuel** supply capacity wasn’t high, but analysis predicted it would be possible for the **Star Forces** to compensate for that.

The *Arlaitec* transferred over to **planar space** and charged in a column of single-ship **bubbles**. In **planar space**, lighter meant faster. Keeping one ship to each **bubble** made each of those bubbles move as fast as possible. Even so, it would take them an estimated seventy-four hours and seventeen minutes by ship’s time to reach the *Saudec Fanbor* (Fahnbo Portal).

A change occurred in the **planar space** which had previously been the picture of tranquility eighteen hours and fifty-one minutes after the *Arlaitec* emerged from *Busec Portal 3077*. 2,776 *cédlairh* in the two o’clock direction, a swarm of **bubbles** was observed splitting apart, having emerged from *Saudec Socnsocngana Buser* (*Busec Portal 998*). Atosryua summoned her **staff officers** without delay and held a meeting.

“*Samsirh 100* is believed to be the enemy,” reported the **Information Staff Officer**.

“*Samsirh 100*” was a provisional appellation for the unidentified group. Though it was clear they weren’t allied ships, there was the possibility they were a civilian convoy. If these were just non-combatants fleeing in anticipation of the Empire’s invasion, they could be ignored. Yet all signs indicated otherwise. *Busec Portal 998* was a **portal** without any utility, just like ***Busec Portal 3077***. There was no reason a civilian convoy would stop by the area. Then there was the course they were taking — it was plain to see they were headed for an encounter with the *Arlaitec*. That would be a strange choice for civilians *fleeing* from the enemy fleet, but made all the sense in the world for a combat corps intending to impede an invasion.

“Assuming they’re all battleships, how much firepower do they have overall?” asked Atosryua.

“About a half-squadron’s worth,” replied the **Exploration Staff Officer**.

If unarmed ships were mixed in among that group, then their actual strength was even lower.

“If we do end up engaging, we’d beat them hands down,” murmured Atosryua.

This didn’t make her particularly happy. **Fleet 1**’s mission was reconnaissance. Preserving their full strength was a more meritorious deed than exterminating a small enemy corps. Besides, the full-scale maneuvers were yet to start. These were still just the preparatory stages.

“Estimated encounter point now in.”

Two intersecting lines appeared on the **planar space map**. Naturally, the enemy’s course was nothing more than a prediction. It could change at the enemy’s pleasure. Meanwhile, their own course was what was scheduled, but it wasn’t as though it couldn’t be altered.

“Is it possible to evade them and infiltrate Fahnbo?” asked Atosryua.

The planned route of the *Arlaitec*, as displayed on the **planar space map**, changed under the supposition that the very-likely-to-be-the-enemy group of ships wanted to battle. It was indeed possible to reach Fahnbo without encountering the enemy, but the route was too roundabout. It would make them so late to arrive that the operation would have a tough time working around it, or so the analysis found.

“Plus,” said Atosryua bitterly, “if we enter the **Fahnbo Portal** the long way around, they might be waiting for us outside the **Portal**.”

“Indeed, ma’am,” said the **Chief of Staff**. “Evading them is pointless.”

“Then stay the course. Aim for the shortest possible distance to the **Fahnbo Portal**. And continue paying attention to *Samsirh* 100.”

She herself thought her orders were quite banal, but taking some kind of eccentric third way would be meaningless.

The encounter would take place in forty hours, nineteen minutes’ time at the earliest. Needless to say, it could take longer depending on *Samsirh* 100’s activity.

After a short while, *Samsirh* 100 changed direction toward Fahnbo. If they kept on going, the encounter would not take place near the **Fahnbo Portal**.

That moment, swarms of **bubbles** emerged from the **portals** in the surroundings as well, and they showed signs of gathering at Fahnbo. The **bubble** swarms were each given the provisional name *Samsirh* followed by their own respective sequential serial numbers.

Though Atosryua had initially viewed *Samsirh* 100's movements as a nuisance, now that she saw the different *Samsirhs* were in the process of amassing at Fahnbo, she thought of it as convenient for them.

The plan had been to scout out the **portals** in the area after securing Fahnbo. Then the ships of the *Arlaitec* would act primarily independently of one another. Taken together, they only made for a single squadron at most. As a general rule, ships doing recon were supposed to avoid combat, but sometimes they would stumble into an engagement and be forced to fight. If small-scale battles kept flaring up, it was possible they could be put in a losing position at some point. It was preferable to go willingly into combat just once while they had superior firepower; that way, they could minimize damages.

Yet after a while, Atosryua grew uneasy once again. It was becoming clearer and clearer that there were more enemy forces lurking in this remote region than expected. Their chance of victory was still exceedingly high, but it meant they wouldn't be able to avoid taking a not-insignificant amount of damage. Nevertheless, they couldn't be left alone; otherwise, they were risking the **patrol ships** that would be sent out in every direction once they made Fahnbo an operational base getting wrecked.

Atosryua was left with two options. The first was to give up on scouting out the area. The fact that the enemy was here in higher numbers than expected had been confirmed, after all. They could choose to leave the rest to the main forces and steer the *Arlaitec* to another sector. The range that **Fleet 1** was to scout out was wide enough to do so. More specifically, they could make the Zahnbezzzy Star System, the system that the **recon sub-fleet** *Celsiss* was preparing to secure, their strategic base.

The second option was to stick to their original course of action and seize Fahnbo. Naturally, she didn't plan to wait until the enemy had their defenses fully set up. They would attack before the gathering of forces was complete, crushing the enemy's most powerful corps before sweeping up the remnants. Afterward, they would press ahead with their reconnaissance.

Atosryua had her **staff officers** analyze the two options. Option 1 was preferable if they wished to keep their losses to a minimum. But Atosryua commanded not just this sub-fleet but also the entirety of **Fleet 1**. She couldn't restrict her thinking to the *Arlaitec*. Her number one priority was the successful execution of the recon mission. After all, the whole point of preserving their strength was to get a grasp of the enemy's movements with greater efficiency.

The staff officers couldn't reach a conclusion. There wasn't enough info to go on, though that was a foregone outcome considering **Fleet**

1, whose ships were supposed to gather that info, wasn't fully operational quite yet.

"Which of the two is the more advantageous option can't be determined through concrete numbers, ma'am," reported **Chief of Staff Bohbgaf**.

From the first, it was up to Atosryua, the **Commander-in-Chief**, to decide. Even if she was only supplied with this fodder for making a decision and nothing more, she had to accept it.

"It's refreshing. A novel sensation," Atosryua told Bohbgaf with feeling.

"What is, ma'am?"

"Being on the battlefield, racking my head trying to figure out how *not* to fight."

"Such is recon work, ma'am."

"See, I got my start in an **assault ship**. Maybe my advancement to a **raid ship** was a mistake."

Put simply, **raid ships** were **patrol ships** without **mobile space-time mines**. However, they were closer to **assault ships** in terms of their operation procedures. They never did anything like single-ship recon deep past enemy lines.

"I truly enjoy this work, ma'am."

"How I envy you," said Atosryua facetiously. "Come to think of it, I heard rumors that the **Archduchess of Laitpanh** wanted the **Fleet 1 Commander-in-Chief** position."

"She has a long career as a recon corps commander."

"I wonder what she found so fun about it. Don't get me wrong; of course, I understand what an important task it is. But given what I've heard tell of her personality, I don't think the mission's importance informs her liking it or not."

"While I myself have never served under Lonh-*Sporr*, I have spoken to someone who served in her staff, and I am told she assesses herself as having a save-amusements-for-later personality."

"I wonder if to her, recon work is the fast that whets the appetite for the feast."

"That may just be, ma'am."

"I may be a **noble** myself, but I'm a poor one. I could never imitate the **Archduchess**. Let's enjoy ourselves how we can — a little at a time. Now which one are we doing first?"

"I deem *Samsirh* 007 as the optimal first target."

He'd drawn the same conclusion Atosryua had. *Samsirh* 007 was the next largest enemy corps after *Samsirh* 100. Little was clearly known about all of the *Samsirhs*, so their relative strength couldn't truly be evaluated, but if they really were all enemy corps, destroying 007 before the troops gathered would cause the enemy's total strength

in front of Fahnbo to drop by about a third. Even as things stood now, the Abhs' victory was definite, but taking care of *Samsirh* 007 first would solidify that victory even further, and ensure that they would win with only slight damage.

"All right, let's mop up starting with them."

"Roger that," nodded Bohbgaf. "The strategic proposals are already prepared."

"Is there also one for if the enemy flees?"

Bohbgaf looked wounded. "Of course there is, ma'am."

"You're right, I'm sorry."

The *Arlaitec* followed the proposal, heading toward the estimated point of encounter with *Samsirh* 007. The estimated power gap ratio was 1:7. *Samsirh* 007 didn't evacuate, probably because they didn't have the **fuel**.

The only place in the sector that had fuel resupply capability was Fahnbo. If they had been aiming for another portal from the beginning, they would have had a means of escape, but they had no way of taking a different path. In the end, *Samsirh* 007 responded as best they could — they surrendered.

Samsirh 007 ended up being a small corps of **assault ships**. Since they were small-scale ships, they could have fled swiftly through **planar space** by forming single-ship **bubbles**. The large, heavy **patrol ships** that made up the *Arlaitec* wouldn't have been able to give chase. It was the lack of **fuel** that held them back. They didn't have enough of it to shake off the *Arlaitec*. Having said that, they had no chance of winning if they had fought — in short, surrender was the only way to survive.

Given that the **recon sub-fleet** *Arlaitec* was not damaged, it would have been nice to be able to be grateful, but it didn't turn out like that. Although *Samsirh* 007 had surrendered, they could hardly bring enemy ships into the battlefield. They captured a single enemy ship for purposes of investigation, with the rest discarded to be swallowed by **planar space**. What hurt, however, was that a **patrol ship** had to be set aside to evacuate the prisoners of war from the front.

"I wonder whether we would have lost more had there been a fight," said Atosryua, after the disposal was over with.

"No, ma'am. In all likelihood, we wouldn't have lost a ship," replied Bohbgaf.

"I figured as much."

It was perhaps the best tactical maneuver the enemy could have done using the lackluster firepower they had. Atosryua couldn't shake the feeling that they'd been swindled.

The *Samsirhs* apart from 007 came together and obstructed the

path of the *Arlaitec*, which was heading for the **Fahnbo Portal**.

I really wish they'd do us a favor and surrender, thought Atosryua.

The **3-space** side of the **Fahnbo Portal** had almost no military strength left. If they surrendered, they'd simply be disarmed and travel through the **Portal** together. Unfortunately, the enemy responded to the *Arlaitec*'s signal of challenge with their own.

"Guess I couldn't've expected otherwise," she muttered to herself, before issuing the order to prepare for battle.

"How should we conduct the **mine battle**?" asked Bohbgaf.

For **patrol ships**, **mobile space-time mines** were a precious resource. Each patrol ship could only carry a few. The prospect of resupplying after capturing Fahnbo was there, but it wouldn't be possible to do so immediately. Bobgahf was inquiring as to his commanding officer's wishes because it was estimated that they could also win without using **mines**.

"Let's do it. And splashily at that," decided Atosryua.

Mines could be resupplied, but those killed in action would never return. The drawback was that since they'd only be able to resupply later down the line, they'd have to continue operations without the **mines** for a while. On the other hand, if they wiped out the *Samsirhs*, then the ammo shortage could be tolerated to an extent.

"I believe it would be best to limit it to half our supply" said Bobgahf.

"Then that's what we'll do."

They could expect a complete victory either way. The **inter-bubble communication** ordering the ships to prepare for **mine battle** was sent from the **patrol ship** *Beunerath*.

The *Glagac Byrer Casna* (Fleet 1 Flagship) *Beunerath* used practically all of its **mine deck** as its command facility, and there were no **mines** aboard ship, but all of the ships under its command had ejected half *their* **mines**. That being said, since this was still the preparatory stage of the operation, each of those ships' mines stayed within their respective **bubbles**.

The designated targets of the mine volley were sent from the *Beunerath* to each ship in turn. The enemy was the first side to actually fire their **mines**.

"It's a surprisingly dense swarm," remarked Atosryua.

"Bearing in mind the analyses of the information we've accrued thus far," said Bohbgaf, "they can't have many **battle-line ships**. I daresay they loaded **mines** onto **supply ships**."

"Then I wonder whether they've any more firepower left to speak of."

"It's not likely they do, ma'am."

But it didn't matter that the enemy had next to no remaining war

potential — Atosryua had zero intention of being lazy about this.

“All of our ships have completed preparations for the mine assault,” reported the **Communications Staff Officer**.

Atosryua nodded. “Fire.”

In unison, **mine bubbles** split off from the **patrol ship bubbles** of the *Arlaitec*.

Oftentimes during **mine battles**, mine counter-offensives were launched. **Mines** from opposing sides destroyed each other, thinning out the number of mines that made it all the way to the opposing ships’ position. Recon corps, on the other hand, rarely ever launched mine counter-offensives. The **mines** on **patrol ships** were precious and valuable. Atosryua didn’t order a counter-offensive, for their objective was destroying the enemy ships. The **Star Forces’** mines ignored the enemy’s mines and hurtled in the **Fahnbo Portal’s** direction. Needless to say, the enemy mines did not likewise ignore their Star Forces counterparts. They hunted down the mine bubbles fired by the *Arlaitec* as though possessed by a loathing for their own kind. Thus did a fair number of mines get taken out and converted into space-time particles. Suddenly, the remaining enemy **mines** came at the Star Forces, pushing their way through the **space-time particle** ripples triggered by the dying mines.

“Enemy mines making impact shortly,” said the **Exploration Staff Officer**.

Atosryua’s eyes fell on the **planar space map** projected over the floor. Each of the squadrons of the **recon sub-fleet** *Arlaitec* assumed single-line formations and squared off against the enemy. The **bubble** of the ship at the lead and the light-weight **bubble** thought to be an enemy mine were now fusing. The **bubbles** that went past then got sucked into the second and third single-ship **bubbles**. Five **bubbles** shot through the columns of the *Arlaitec*, only to then take a sharp turn and attack the rearmost ships. The **flagship** *Beunerath* was stationed at the back as well, and one **bubble** was closing in on them.

Dealing with these kinds of things was the **Ship Commanders’** job. There was nothing **Fleet Command** could do about it.

“All hands, prepare the **EM cannons** for a fusillade,” came the onboard announcement.

So the Ship Commander plans to use the EM cannons to intercept the mines, thought Atosryua.

“Mines **fusing** in ten seconds,” came the speakers once again. “...Five, four, three, two one, fusing.”

That moment, the **Commander’s Bridge** shook faintly. The *Beunerath* had fired its **EM cannons** at the **mine**.

“Enemy **mine** destroyed,” came the announcement soon after. Relief flooded the **Bridge**.

“Report present damages,” said Atosryua.

“Damages are extremely minimal, ma’am,” reported Bohbgaf. “The **patrol ships** *Boïrath* and *Cidrath* took point-blank hits and sustained hull damage, but that is about all. It hasn’t affected their combat or navigational abilities.”

“I see.”

Mobile space-time mines packed extreme explosive power, so they could cause damage even if properly intercepted. Meanwhile, it was estimated that the enemy corps lost around a fifth of its ships to the mine volley. This widened the power gap further still in the Empire’s favor. Atosryua concluded that the outcome of the battle was truly set in stone now, but the enemy had apparently concluded otherwise, as they weren’t surrendering.

One after the other, the *Arlaitec*’s **patrol ships fused** with enemy ships. **Space-time bubbles** were isolated pockets of fourth-dimensional space-time, each a universe in its own right. The battle raged on inside multiple mini-universes, and in most every one of them, the **Star Forces** prevailed.

Yet they couldn’t manage to win unscathed. A sad report: “The **patrol ship** *Cairath* has been destroyed.”

The *Cairath* was the only ship the **Star Forces** lost in this clash. The **Clash at the Fahnbo Portal-Sea** marked the rising of the curtain on **Operation Thunderpeal**, and one could get away with calling it a total victory for the **Star Forces**.

Chapter 10: *Raichacarh Üécr Sauder Habamerir* (Clash at the Habameri Portal-Sea)

The fleet Lafier commanded, *Byrec Bina Raudrochotr* (Thunderpeal Fleet 3), entered the Fahnbo Star System. More than twenty-seven days and sixteen hours had passed since **Fleet 1** seized the territory. The operation was proceeding smoothly, but there were a few points of concern.

“Isn’t that the enemy’s main force?” asked Lafier.

“Yes, ma’am,” Sobash nodded. “I believe that’s likelier than not.”

Reports were in: a large group of **bubbles** had departed from the Habameri Portal *Saudec Habamerir* (Habameri Portal) and was heading toward the **Wesco Monarchy**. The bubble swarm was dubbed *Redic 100*.

“That’s not what we were expecting.” According to the estimations Lafier had been given, the PSSU military would draw the **Star Forces** to either their largest military base, Habameri, or their main star system, Nohv Kinshass, to set up a decisive battle. They had pulled their elite troops from the remote sectors and concentrated their forces to the rear. However, it seemed that they had altered their plans, and now intended to fight in an area closer to the border of their sphere of influence. This was not bad news for the **Thunderpeal Fleet**; generally, the closer troops were to their base, the easier combat proved for them. In other words, the enemy had given up the home field advantage voluntarily.

Of course, it wasn’t uncommon for proactive interception strategies to be adopted due to political reasons; a strategic retreat would have meant ceding territory to the enemy, however temporarily. Being in essence a spacefaring race, such a thing wouldn’t bother the Abh, but the national governments that were based in **landworlds** had to care. That being said, the PSSU’s political structure was the closest of the Four Nations to the Empire’s. Moreover, almost all of the PSSU’s star systems would not be in any immediate distress even if they became isolated economically. Analyses averred that even if they temporarily surrendered parts of their sphere of influence without resistance, the impact on the PSSU’s structure would be minimal.

Winning battles against enemy forces that were stubbornly attached to **landworlds** left a bad aftertaste. Their inhabitants could just continue enjoying their landworld lives and relax until a settlement was worked out, but they always cried and begged about shortages and inconveniences. Granted, if that was all, it wouldn't be unbearable. After all, unlike the proud **landworld citizens** of the Empire, they simply couldn't take care of themselves. But there were also times when the Abh just could not understand what was making them so dissatisfied. During such times, they could only interpret the backlash as stemming from some inscrutable religious reasons.

Lafier's worst memory during this war was, needless to say, the Fall of Lahkfacar. But her next worst memories were to do with captured **landworlds**. Owing to that fact, Lafier's impression of the PSSU was a favorable one. She had it in her head that the PSSU would not drive her crazy with baffling and ridiculous demands to nearly the same extent. At present, Lafier's rank was high enough to foist work that directly involved **landworlds** onto subordinates, but she didn't want them to feel uncomfortable while doing their duty, if possible.

In any case, the PSSU appeared to be clinging to maintaining their sphere of influence. She got the sense that they didn't want the right of control over the **landworlds** stolen from them for even a moment. Lafier was disappointed.

She didn't know whether Central felt the same way as her. She didn't want to believe that that distorted their predictions, but it was self-evident that Central's predictions had been wrong.

Lafier figured that if they ended up winning, they would probably have to slog through annoying and frustrating occupation governance, but they couldn't exactly afford to let the enemy fleet that had so kindly come to them roost in Habameri, either. The ultimate goal of **Operation Thunderpeal** was the PSSU's main star system, Nohv Kinshass, but Habameri could not be ignored. If they left a military base like Habameri alone and kept advancing, they risked losing contact with Central. As a matter of fact, they had only to seize Habameri and Nohv Kinshass to all but end the war with the PSSU. The other star systems would fall one way or another. Destroying this one enemy fleet would clear all obstacles to the occupation of Habameri, and once the Habameri Star System was obtained, there would be none who could prevent Nohv Kinshass from falling into **Star Forces** hands. Conquering the PSSU would be as easy as picking a fallen item up off the ground. In other words, if they destroyed *Redic 100*, **Operation Thunderpeal** would wind to a glorious finish. She didn't know what the operation to retake Lahkfacar would be named, but she knew this operation was developing momentum for that one.

Yet Lafier still had something weighing on her mind. "Will we be

able to join back up with **Fleet 1** in time?" she asked.

"That would be difficult, ma'am," said Sobash.

The site of the decisive battle was estimated to be the *Ŭéch Sauder Habamerir* (Habameri Portal-Sea). The plan had been to link back up with **Fleet 1** before reaching it. Then, in the event they won the battle, they would gain control of Habameri and make it their base before proceeding to scout out the Nohv Kinshass area. But the battlefield was no longer going to be that close to the **Habameri Portal**; it was closer to the Star Forces troops now. They wouldn't be able to amass and merge with **Fleet 1** in time. According to the **staff officers'** analysis, if they tried calling back Fleet 1 despite that, they would be defeated one by one.

"I suppose it can't be helped," said Lafier, resigning herself just like that. There was still something else she was worried about, though. "What of potential reinforcements being sent to Habameri?"

"The activity in the area is high," replied Sobash, "but we don't know whether or not they're reinforcements. If they are, then it's cause for alarm."

"Indeed."

If their calculations were to be believed, the PSSU oughtn't have much fighting power left. The chances were high that the reinforcements would be coming from an allied nation — particularly Hania, given their proximity. If Hania had sent a large number of reinforcements to other countries, then that was yet another mistaken prediction on the part of Central. They'd thought Hania would focus on defending their own borders; if they sent **fleets** outside their sphere of influence at all, it was supposed to be minimal.

What a pain, thought Lafier. She missed the old days. When she was lower-ranked, all she'd had to think about was trouncing the enemy ships before her eyes.

"Is it possible to open?" she asked.

In **planar space**, the movement of **space-time bubbles** could be observed from a considerable distance away. However, there was no way of knowing for certain whether the **bubbles** contained merchant ships, **warships**, or anything else. Of course, it was possible to make an educated guess based on the **bubbles'** velocity and movements, but such things could be deliberate camouflage as well. A classic tactic in **planar space** was to create a false "fleet" by adding rock lumps to the bubbles of small ships such that their mass appeared to be the mass of warships.

The only way to distinguish ship-types without room for doubt was to **fuse** with their bubbles and see. That was what Lafier meant by the word "open."

"We have already formulated a strategy," said Sobash.

The proposed strategy was displayed on the **planar space map**. The vanguard corps of **Fleet 1** would fuse with some enemy **bubbles**, and then immediately split back out again.

It's not really much of a "strategy," thought Lafier. "Is it possible?"

"We've concluded that it should be. Of course, we'd be leaving the details to **Fleet 1 Command**."

For large-scale operations like **Operation Thunderpeal**, the battlefield was always vast. Currently, it took more than two hundred hours for information from **Fleet 1** to reach Fleet Command. That wasn't even accounting for the time required for information exchanges between **Fleet 1 Command** and its in-the-field ships. The sheer time gap made issuing detailed instructions meaningless. For example, the ships making up **Fleet 1's** vanguard may have already been replaced.

"I approve," said Lafier.

"It does pain me to push our former superior officer around like this," joked Sobash.

"I daresay said former superior officer is *already* working on it."

Thunderpeal Fleet Command gave **Fleet 1 Command** a great deal of discretion, seeing as it was impossible to hand down orders in real time. If they decided that it'd be prudent to identify the contents of the group of **bubbles** migrating to Habameri, **Fleet 1 Command** could execute on that at its discretion. In fact, they *should* have done so without needing to be ordered to. Lafier thought it was safe to expect that much competence from Atosryua.

"I hope so," Sobash smiled.

"If you were still **Commodore** Atosryua's **Chief of Staff**, would you so counsel her?"

"If we had just a little more firepower, I would have recommended it without a second's pause, ma'am."

"That's my impression, too." That was where Lafier's concern lay. Atosryua was currently keeping damages within the expected range. However, dispatching ships beyond the **Habameri Portal** would be highly dangerous. One wrong move, and the level of acceptable losses would be exceeded. If the battle against the PSSU was functionally settled in Habameri, that wouldn't be a problem, but if the campaign continued, the losses would definitely have an impact.

"Would you prefer to assign a single squadron to the order?" Sobash was suggesting sending reinforcements to offset the danger level of the order. Since the only part of the **Thunderpeal Fleet** that was presently fighting was **Fleet 1**, the rest of the armada had taken no damage. They could stand to spare a single recon squadron.

"No, we oughtn't shift the formation at this stage," said Lafier.

"Roger that," said Sobash, who saluted.

As it so happened, Atosryua did in fact decide to uncover the identity of the reinforcements to Habameri, issuing the order to her subordinate troops about two hours before Lafier did. Atosryua's order was sent to the **patrol ship Zausecaü**, which was originally tasked with cutting the deepest into the enemy's sphere of influence. But it had since been ordered to turn back before it ever got past the **Habameri Portal**. The *Zausecaü*, which had completed the reconnaissance, was to join consort ships at *Saudec Gogobuna Buser* (*Busec Portal 646*), get resupplied, and return to Fahnbo.

However, they had to extend the distance of their course due to avoiding contact with the enemy, so they would run out of **fuel** before they reached the resupply point. As such, **Fleet 1 Command** elected to advance the **stock ships** further ahead of *Busec Portal 646*. They couldn't exactly send unarmed stock ships somewhere even **patrol ships** would run into danger, so they gave the squadron a guard convoy. That squadron also had its primary job to do, so they decided to extract half a squadron from the **recon sub-fleet** directly commanded by **Fleet Command**, the *Arlaitec*, and have it act in its stead.

It took a ton of effort just to make a single **patrol ship's** excursion longer than expected.

Aboard the **patrol ship Zausecaü**, which received the order, all the crew members grumbled about it, including the **Ship Commander**, but they understood how important their new mission was. Their report would be reaching Central's ears. Their mission was to probe the interiors of the enemy **bubbles** heading for Habameri by fusing with them. No reconnaissance targets were singled out, but the conditions were set: they were ordered to investigate **bubbles** with a mass of 1,000 *saiboc* or higher, which was more massive than a **patrol ship**. Of course, since this was already risky work, the crew of the *Zausecaü* had no intention of taking half measures.

Sixty-nine hours after receiving the order, the *Zausecaü* was approaching a **bubble** with a mass of about 1,200 *saiboc*.

"The target is clearly trying to buy time," reported the **Vice Commander** to the **Ship Commander**.

The recon target was trying to distance itself. But unless it got torn in two, the *Zausecaü* would catch up in less than ten hours. But even just ten hours were precious, as time was not to be wasted.

"We'll pierce them with a **conveyance ship**," ordered the **Ship Commander**.

"Then I'll be its **Skipper**," said the **Vice Commander**.

"Please," he replied. "If only I could go."

Serving as the **Skipper** of a **conveyance ship** was usually the work of the **Messenger**, the lowest-ranked officer on the **bridge**, but

in this case, it was a vital role on which the mission's success hinged. It needed to be carried out by an experienced **soldier**.

Patrol ships that acted independently had a larger number of **conveyance ships** aboard, and the *Zausecaii* contained three. The **Vice Commander** piloted **Conveyance Ship 1**, which split away from the **bubble** of its mother ship and headed for the enemy bubble. The *Zausecaii*'s **bubble** was at most twenty percent faster than the enemy bubble. The conveyance ship bubble, on the other hand, was capable of reaching speeds that were ten times faster.

When the conveyance ship **split off**, the **Ship Commander** ordered his crew to prepare for **mine battle**. **Antimatter fuel** was injected into the **mobile space-time** mines loaded aboard the *Zausecaii*. After the fuel injection was finished, the **mines** were ejected, though they remained in the *Zausecaii*'s space-time. While preparations for **mine battle** were in progress, the **conveyance ship bubble** continued approaching their recon target until, at last, they fused — only to split off again the very next instant. It was like the prick of a needle. The conveyance ship bubble made its way back at full speed, while the enemy **bubble** split into nine. They appeared to be a group of small-scale **assault ship** equivalents. The split-off bubbles chased after the conveyance ship like hounds. **Assault ship**-style ships couldn't catch up with **conveyance ships**. However, **patrol ships** could easily apprehend them.

The **Ship Commander** ordered his crew to commence the **mine battle**. Each mine was assigned a **bubble** to target, and then they **split off**. Fortunately, the *Zausecaii* had a full complement of **mines** on hand. The **Ship Commander**'s policy was to "fire everything we've got," and so all of them were deployed.

Immediately after the **mines split off**, the enemy **bubbles** reversed course, but the **mines** were faster. The enemy bubbles fused into one once more. That way, it'd be easier for them to intercept the incoming **mines**. One after the other, the mine bubbles fused with the enemy bubble. The enemy bubble did not disappear, but it did spew **space-time particles** as it shed mass greatly.

"The **conveyance ship** is now fusing."

No sooner did that report come in than the *Zausecaii* and the **conveyance ship** conducted an **information link**. The results of the recon of the enemy **bubble** were flowing into the **patrol ship**.

After reading the overview, the **Ship Commander** knitted his brows.

"This is... looks like I'll have to make the **Vice Commander** go and inform **Fleet Command**, too," he decided, even though they still hadn't taken the **conveyance ship** with the Vice Commander inside back in. "I'll have the **Vice Commander** switch ships. Ready

Conveyance Ship 3. This'll be a long-distance mission. Will it get through if we have it leave now?"

The **stock ships** and the single escort squadron that was coming to pick up *Zausecaü* had another role besides resupply, and that was relaying information. The Ship Commander was asking whether it'd be possible for the **conveyance ship** to cross paths with a **stock ship** given a conveyance ship's cruising range.

The initial plan had been to stay far enough away from the recon target and make sure everything was safe before sending out a **conveyance ship**. However, the **Ship Commander** determined that since they'd taken down that target, the conditions were met without needing to gain any distance. Consequently, it was now possible to launch a **conveyance ship** earlier than planned, but that meant the nearest stock ship would be that much further away. The **Ship Commander** was worried that the cruising range would not be sufficient with the standard conveyance ship equipment.

"We'll need a drop tank," said the *Almrilbigac* (Senior Navigator).

"I trust that's okay, **Inspector Supervisor**," asked the Ship Commander.

The supervisor in charge of the maintenance of the ship and its onboard vessels nodded. "I will start outfitting it at once."

"Please do. Now listen up, everyone. Those were Hanian ships inside those **bubbles**. In other words, Central's projections were dead wrong, and the chances are high that Hania has set out on a large-scale defensive of the PSSU. We must inform **Fleet Command** and, by extension, Central as soon as possible. I'll be sending out Conveyance Ship 3, but I can't allow for the possibility, however unlikely, that the report doesn't get there, so I'm sending out Ship 2 as well. I'm assigning the *Roirilbigac* (Associate Navigator) to be its **Skipper**. Ship 1 is to be outfitted the second it comes back in. I'm putting the *Roitlaciac* (Associate Gunner) on that one."

Lafier received the news from the *Zausecaü* about thirty-one hours after the ship she was on, the *Clybnochec*, left Fahnbo. Lafier immediately gathered her staff officers and held a meeting. One person who hadn't been so summoned also came along:

"Please give me permission to listen, *Fiac*," said the *Fanigac Glagamr Byrer Raudrochotr* (Thunderpeal Fleet Command Abdicant) *Lamlonh*.

"Of course, *Nisoth*," said Lafier. "I would be grateful if you could grant us your opinion."

Lamlonh looked Lafier in the face with pitying eyes.

Lafier was all too familiar with that expression now, and she detested it. She was relieved when all *Lamlonh* said was: "My thanks,

Fiac.” If she had given Lafier words of sympathy, she would hardly have been able to stand it.

“I’ve been told the gist, but I don’t know the details. Fill me in,” said Lafier.

“We too have only just received the info, and are currently analyzing it, ma’am,” said *Cnataii*, the **Senior Information Staff Officer**. “Though even at this stage, we can rest assured that it was cutting-edge Hanian **assault ships** that engaged the *Zausecaii*.”

“That is, Hania’s top-of-the-line troops?” Lafier frowned.

“We cannot rule out even the possibility they came from Hania’s main forces.”

It seemed as though the situation was graver than they’d anticipated. They’d entertained the possibility that Hania might be sending a large amount of reinforcements, but they’d envisioned second-tier units.

The Hania Federation’s leadership was made up of **landworld** representatives. A star system that was insignificant to the Federation as a whole was irreplaceable to one or more of its leaders. This limited what the Hanian military could do strategically, making strategic withdrawals politically untenable as just one example of that. Historically, Hania’s strategy was generally solid; they only launched proactive offensives against enemy troops they had an overwhelming advantage against. When they got invaded, they would take the major fights near the border of their sphere of influence.

However, it was a rational strategy for Hania to sally forth outside their borders in a big way. It was the existence of the **Skeer Monarchy** that Central thought made that prospect difficult for them.

“One worries about **His Highness the King of Clyoov**’s condition,” said *Lamlonh*, referring to Lafier’s father.

The presence of the **Skeer Monarchy**’s **Star Forces** units was one of the factors that informed the conjecture that Hania wouldn’t send out large-scale reinforcements. If the Empire’s remaining military power in **Skeer** retained a sufficient amount of power, Hania would not have been able to readily move their fleets.

Perhaps the Skeer Monarchy no longer exists, thought Lafier, the dark suspicion worming its way into her heart. No... the suspicion had always lain in the recesses of her heart.

The Fall of the **Capital**, Lahkfacar, resulted in the division of the Empire into isolated territories. Of the **Eight Monarchies**, the four monarchies of Barkeh, Wesco, Syoorgzedeh, and Raseess could still be reached even after Lahkfacar fell into enemy hands. The four could be said to constitute the “main body” of the post-division Empire. It was where the **Emperor** resided.

The remaining four monarchies, separated as they were from the

“main body,” could not contact each other and were completely isolated. Of those four, both Ileesh and Clyoov were completely subdued. The Four Nations Alliance was disseminating that triumph of theirs with pride, and the Empire was forced to admit it was the truth in the face of various corroborating pieces of evidence. The **Clyoov Monarchy**, where Lafier’s house had served as the nominal **kings and queens** for generations, was the first to be lost. The enemy fleet passed through it in their avalanche trajectory toward Lahkfacar.

In the **Ileesh Monarchy**, an armada with UH troops at its main core easily defeated a small fleet of isolated Star Forces and occupied all of the **territory-nations** and **domains** there. The **Sfagnoff Marquessate**, where Lafier and Jint had once hid, the **Countdom of Hyde**, Jint’s home system, and the **Countdom of Vorlash**, which could be considered Jint’s second home, were stolen away from the Empire for the second time after they had been occupied by the enemy for the first time in the early days of the war. In addition, **Fleet 1 Commander-in-Chief** Atosryua’s **domain**, the **Febdash Barony**, was also contained within the enemy’s sphere of influence.

Compared to those monarchies, they had cause for some hope regarding the **Bargzedeh Monarchy**. The FNA had yet to declare victory there. However, given their limited war potential, the Monarchy’s future seemed bleak. Their most debilitating defects were their limited ability to repair ships and their nonexistent ability to construct new ones.

Apart from the main body of the Empire, only the **Skeer Monarchy** was capable of building ships. In the lead-up to the Fall of Lahkfacar, a complete **space-time bubble generator** production line was sent there, which should have enabled them to construct **interstellar ships** and be self-sufficient with regard to **mobile space-time mines**. That was why the Empire expected the **Star Forces** troops based at **Skeer** to be alive and well. Moreover, they could more or less tell Skeer still existed through the enemy’s activity. They didn’t know that they called themselves the **Area 2 Fleet**, though, so they tentatively named it the *Byrec Scirr* (Skeer Fleet) and endeavored to get a grasp of their present situation. The **Skeer Monarchy** bordered the PSSU and the Hania Federation. Hania would have hesitated to sortie outside their borders if the **Skeer Fleet** was still powerful. That Hania had sent out troops from their main forces meant either that the **Skeer Fleet** was extremely weak now, or that they’d been destroyed.

“So in other words, you’re saying that even if we annihilate the PSSU’s fleets, Habameri still won’t fall so easily, correct?” said Lafier.

“We will likely be forced to fight in consecutive engagements,” said Sobash.

“When the first engagement ends, will we have a base of

operations so we can reorganize the fleet?”

She was also taking into consideration (albeit reluctantly) the possibility they lost in the battle against the PSSU's fleet. If that came to pass, then **Operation Thunderpeal** would obviously be discontinued, and the fleet was to retreat to the **Spohtnebryoov Astrobase**. That being said, there was now a possibility they'd have to retreat even if they *won* that battle. Habameri's defenses might be strong enough that even after they wrecked the PSSU's military, they could be forced to try taking Habameri a while afterward. But Spohtnebryoov was too far away to use as a base for attacking Habameri.

“For a base that can hold the entire fleet, we would have to return to the **Astrobase**, ma'am. Otherwise, we'll have to make do resupplying and getting repaired by splitting up. If only we could concentrate our facilities near and around Fahnbo.”

“Is there the slightest possibility we can?”

“I'll look into it, but I don't think it will be easy, ma'am. There's just no time. I believe it might be more realistic to just expand the facilities' functionality as relay points for wounded officers and damaged ships in need of evacuation from the front.”

“Very well. Do that then, and quickly.”

“Yes ma'am. I would like to send a *casariac longhotr* (liaison staff officer) to the Fahnbo Base Corps. Permission to do so, ma'am?”

“Granted,” she nodded. “Who will be sent?”

“It's an extremely important mission. I'll be sending *Ruséc Casarér* (Vice Chief of Staff) Ecryua.”

Sobash looked at Ecryua, whose expression didn't shift one jot. But he could swear her chin dropped a tiny amount.

“Very well. Will you give her an assistant?” asked Lafier, interpreting this as Ecryua consenting.

“That's probably necessary. I'd like to have a few **carrycrafts** accompany her as well. Later, I shall discuss with the **Vice Chief of Staff** which officers and ships to select.”

“Understood. Please do. Now, what to do about **mines**? Do we have enough in stock to be able to endure a second battle?”

The **Strategy Staff Officer, Deca-Commander** Lecsh, stood up with a somewhat nervous look on her face. “If we figure in **Fleet 5's** mines, it's more or less a two-on-one battle,” began her report. “Fleets 2, 3, and 4 have already been loaded with the maximum capacity of mines. **Fleet 1's** haven't been tallied yet, but they probably have less than thirty percent left. It goes without saying that there are variations in mine numbers between ships. 0.2 battles' worth have been stored in Fahnbo.”

“If so, I have no choice but to order **Fleet 5** to carry their **mines**

to Fahnbo.”

“That’s the best we can do — if, that is, we’re only thinking about the battle on this front,” said Sobash.

“Are you worried about a counter-invasion from the **Wesco Portal**?”

“I am, ma’am. That two-on-one figure is only true for this front. Assuming an invasion from the **Wesco Portal**, the total of mines is only barely enough for one engagement.”

“You all must struggle for *Dusanh Érumitta* (His Majesty *Dusanh*)’s follies, too,” muttered *Lamlonh*.

Lafier agreed. She and her **staff officers** were struggling so much entirely because Central underestimated the possibility of enemy reinforcements. Lafier felt vindicated in thinking they should have put all of their strength in an operation to retake Lahkfacar. She cursed the fact she wasn’t one of the **Supreme Commanders**. However, there was no point criticizing the **Emperor** now. Not that she felt like arguing against *Lamlonh*. Fortunately, at the **Command Center**, a method for dealing with the **Abdicant**’s muttering had been established, and that was to pretend one didn’t hear it.

“We’ve no other choice. We’ll take **mines** off **Admiral Sporr**,” decided Lafier. “Let off the **mines** that have already been loaded as well, and send them to Fahnbo.”

“Ma’am... I don’t know about that...” said Sobash.

“It will only be **Fleet 5**’s for now. I’m not saying we take the ones they will be getting after this, too. The **mine** shortage will be resolved in a few days’ time, will it not?”

“I believe that’s somewhat optimistic, *Glaharérh*. I will examine the matter closely if you so desire, though.”

“Do you have the time for that? Send the **Vice Chief of Staff** to do that. We’ll leave the valuation to her as well.” Lafier looked at Ecryua.

“The authorization, ma’am,” Ecryua murmured.

“Yes, I know. I grant you a provisional directive. You are now vested with the authority, under the name of the **Thunderpeal Fleet Commander-in-Chief**, to alter the deployment destinations of all the **mines** that **Fleet 5** possesses. I leave whether or not to execute it to your discretion.”

“**Associate Commodore** Ecryua,” said Sobash, “note that if you do decide to execute it, you don’t need to bring *all* the **mines** here. I think you should leave mines to the troops standing off against the **Wesco Portal** especially.”

“That too I leave up to **Associate Commodore** Ecryua,” said Lafier.

Ecryua remained as expressionless as ever, though the edges of her lips did go up slightly.

I guess that's her smiling, thought Lafier.

"I feel for the **Archduchess of Laitpanh**," remarked *Lamlonh*. "I know how dearly she loves to unleash **mines**."

Sobash inadvertently found himself replying to her: "Let's hope that **Fleet 5** won't have to engage in a **mine battle** until additional **mines** arrive from the rear."

"That the **Star Forces** could ever fight so poorly," *Lamlonh* lamented.

This time, no one responded.

After clearing up a handful more questions, Lafier ended the meeting. She herself could just think about knocking down the enemy before her eyes, as initially planned, but the **staff officers** had a colossal amount of work.

The **Thunderpeal Fleet** shifted its formations in the face of the upcoming showdown.

Vanguard recon troops had a significant role to play in the decisive fleet-against-fleet battle. This corps, which was mainly composed of **patrol ships**, was suited to overrunning enemy fleets. They would assault the enemy fleet, tear through its formations, and at times, isolate the **flagship** and launch a concentrated attack.

However, **Fleet 1**, the leading recon corps, would not arrive in time for the battle. The **Fleet Flagship** *Beunerath* would make it, but even the **recon sub-fleet** directly commanded by the Fleet's **Commander-in-Chief**, the *Arlaitec*, lacked a squadron. As such, **patrol ships** and **raid ships** were scraped together from Fleets 2, 3, and 4 and incorporated into **Fleet 1**. Although it was still weaker than the original **Fleet 1**, Lafier had to be satisfied with this.

The rearrangement was completed just before they entered the engagement range of the enemy fleet.

The two armadas were drawing closer.

The **Thunderpeal Fleet** rammed its fifteen columns into *Redic 100*, which was deployed horizontally. As predicted through the fleets' mass, their war potential was roughly equal. Assuming that *Redic 100* was entirely made up of PSSU ships, that nation was mobilizing nearly ninety percent of its strength.

"Commence **mine battle**," ordered Lafier.

Countless **mines** zoomed from the **Thunderpeal Fleet**. Nary a second later, a massive quantity of **bubbles** split off from the enemy fleet as well. The **mine battle** was near evenly matched; the opposing armies of **mines** consumed each other, their hollow deaths causing **planar space** to surge like rough seas. Only a handful of **mines** made it out of the turmoil and reached the opposing camp.

"They fought valiantly facing off against *them*," said *Lamlonh*.

The PSSU was well-known for placing a premium on **mine battles**. The enemy fleet had fired more **mines** than one might suppose given its size.

*That it was such an evenly matched mine battle despite that... thought Lafier. It wouldn't be a stretch to say that meant the **Star Forces** had the upper hand at the moment... But no, she thought, pulling herself together. "Wouldn't be a stretch to say"? That's sophistry, and if I lull myself into a false sense of security, it's all over.*

"Make all the **escort squadrons** pull back," she commanded.

A corps of **defense ships** was stationed at the head of the column. The **defense ship** class of vessels was specialized for anti-**mine** defense. Now that the waves of **mines** had ceased, leaving them on the frontlines was dangerous.

"Shall we send in **Fleet 1**?" asked Sobash.

"No. Shift them to Battle Formation 3."

Allied ships had taken no damage, but then again, the enemy had taken next to no damage too. There was little point attempting a trample-blitz on a nearly unscathed fleet. Projecting **Fleet 1** out away from its allies would just isolate it. **Fleet 1** had a better use — instead of separating it from the main forces, she would make it the advance guard. The trample-blitz would be conducted via the entire **Thunderpeal Fleet**. If the **Fleet** as a whole was a sword, then **Fleet 1** would be its sharp edge.

A short **inter-bubble communication** was transmitted from the **Overall Flagship Clybnochec**, and the **Thunderpeal Fleet** assumed a wedge-shaped formation with **Fleet 1** at the head.

At last, the two fleets clashed.

"The enemy fleet is indeed a PSSU fleet," reported Sobash. "No vessels from other nations identified thus far."

"I see."

There wasn't much the **Fleet Commander-in-Chief** could do at this point of the battle. She just observed the tide of war as the fight progressed.

"We're winning," commented *Lamlonh*, who was likewise spectating.

The **Thunderpeal Fleet**, its constituent fleets now together, was bisecting *Redic 100*.

Lafier beckoned the **Chief of Staff** beside the **Commander's Seat**. "I'd like to hear your opinion: which do we crush first?"

The rightmost group of enemy troops had roughly twice the overall heft of the leftmost group, but only in terms of sheer mass. Without knowing what exactly that mass constituted, it would be unwise to conclude from that alone that it was consequently twice as powerful.

“I believe we ought to exterminate the rightmost corps first,” Sobash replied immediately.

Sobash’s thoughts mirrored Lafier’s. “Very well,” she nodded. “Tell **Fleet 1** they are to move behind the enemy fleet and turn starboard. We will encircle and annihilate the rightmost group.”

Fleet 1 was already on the verge of breaking through the enemy fleet, which launched attacks on both sides of **Fleet 1** lest they get divided. In so doing, however, they were forced to expose their own flanks to other **Star Forces** troops. The attack on Fleet 1 ended up being half-cocked, allowing them to penetrate enemy lines.

Fleets 2 and 3 filled the space previously occupied by **Fleet 1**. **Fleet 4** moved to suppress the frontmost troops of the enemy ranks to the right. When reports came in that the *Redic 100* was completely split in two, the group to the right (relative to the **Thunderpeal Fleet**) was then designated *Redic 101*, while the one on the left was named *Redic 102*. The divided enemy fleet began to retreat, but *Redic 101* was getting encircled, restricting its movements. *Redic 102*, on the other hand, was able to act relatively freely, and it moved to chase **Fleet 1** from behind, only to be contained by **Fleet 2**.

It was a veritable melee now.

A short while later, however, *Redic 102* began retreating in Habameri’s direction once again. It seemed they’d given up on rescuing *Redic 101*.

“Shall we have **Fleet 2** give chase?” asked Sobash.

“No,” replied Lafier right away. “Right now, we pour all our efforts into exterminating *Redic 101*. Call **Fleet 2** back.”

Redic 102 withdrew from the battlefield. At present, four fleets surrounded *Redic 101*, and were surely and steadily gnawing away at it.

“It’s the signal of surrender!” reported the **Communications Staff Officer**. “We’re observing a halt in all **bubbles** of the rightmost enemy group.”

“All ships, cease battling,” ordered Lafier, who then looked at the **planar space map**.

Redic 101 had surrendered, but *Redic 102* was still retreating, and was already too far away now to catch up.

Yet Sobash counseled otherwise: “We should pursue them, ma’am.”

Lafier knew Sobash would never advise giving chase without a means of doing so. “Tell me how.”

“Let’s use the un-amassed **Fleet 1** troops.”

The **Fleet 1** ships that hadn’t made it to the battlefield in time were huddled together in two separate places. Their paths back just happened to overlap, and the groups weren’t formed for combat

purposes, but the **Star Forces** chain of command was flexible, and so long as a commanding officer was designated, those troops would gain cohesion as a corps in short order.

“So we use them to pen the enemy in.”

“Correct. And I believe we ought to leave the enemy troops that surrendered to **Commodore** Dasehf,” said Sobash, referring to the **Fleet 4 Commander-in-Chief**. “I say we give chase with all our remaining strength.”

Since they had crossed blades with the enemy, the enemy’s power level was for the most part established. And according to Sobash, their own troops had strength enough to catch them.

“Very well,” said Lafier. “See to the necessary measures.”

For convenience’s sake, the un-amassed **Fleet 1** corps were named *Byrec Ceutepochceutena* (Fleet 1.1) and *Byrec Ceutepochmata* (Fleet 1.2). As for their commanders, 1.1 was assigned to **Commandant Loiféch** and 1.2 to **Commandant Féruc**.

“I’d like to send **Navigation Officer Gnomboch** and **Strategy Officer Lecsh** to 1.1 and 1.2, respectively, as **Liaison Officers**.”

In this case, the Liaison Staff had two missions. Needless to say, one was to convey **Fleet Command**’s instructions. Both Fleets 1.1 and 1.2 were too far away to use **inter-bubble communications** — **conveyance ships** were the only viable means of communication. Moreover, they had to be able to answer any questions about those instructions, so simply putting just anybody capable of piloting a **conveyance ship** on the job wasn’t going to cut it. It had to be someone who understood how **Command** was thinking. The other mission was to pitch in at the **command center** they were being deployed to. In terms of ship numbers, both corps were slighter larger in scope than two **sub-fleets**. In addition, those forces were cobbled-together. The amount on **Sub-Fleet Command**’s plate seemed to lean toward the excessive side.

Lafier was about to say yes, but she felt a little uneasy: “Will we have enough manpower?” she asked Sobash. “Ecryua isn’t here. Plus, you had several assistants accompany her, didn’t you?”

“Those two are still at the gaining-experience stage,” replied Sobash under his breath. “To be honest, the **Staff Officers Division** can go on without them.”

Now Lafier was worried in a different direction. “Then are they up to the task as **Liaison Officers**?”

“If they looked unfit to be **Liaison Officers**, then they could never get by going forward. In their way, they’re highly talented. They’re merely inexperienced.”

Lafier glanced at *Lamlonh*. She wondered whether *Lamlonh* saw her the same way Sobash saw Lecsh and *Gnomboch*. But they were

right in the middle of a battle. She had no time to spend rolling her eyes.

Lafier called *Gnomboch* and Lecsh to the **Commander's Seat**. "I'm making you **Liaison Officers** and dispatching you to the joint forces' **command center**. As for the details, you'd best discuss them with the **Chief of Staff**. I'm counting on you."

The two young **starpilots** seemed deeply moved.

"I will exert myself to my last drop of strength," said *Gnomboch*.

"I thank you for this mission," said Lecsh, "and I vow that I shall not betray your faith in me."

"Right," said Lafier, favorably impressed by their attitudes. "Make sure to come back alive."

The staff officers left for a meeting.

"How utterly half-baked," said *Lamlonh*. As usual, her voice was too loud to be called a mutter.

"Is that how you feel?" Lafier thought *Lamlonh* was criticizing her leadership, so she couldn't let that remark go.

"I'm speaking of the enemy's activity."

"May I ask you to explain what you mean?"

"It goes without saying, but this is just idle chatter, so listen to what I say as such."

"Understood." Lafier straightened her posture; when an **abdican**t called her own words "idle chatter," it was undoubtedly important. It was just a courtesy on *Lamlonh's* part, as she didn't have the right of command.

"If they're going to surrender here, then they shouldn't have come out here to begin with. We thought we would have to face off against extremely formidable troops in Habameri. Perhaps they wanted to scout us out, but if so, they were far too tenacious about it. If they'd simply tested the waters and then retreated, we wouldn't have been able to catch up to them, and then we'd have our work cut out for us in Habameri. But given that they brought things to a veritable melee, they surrendered all too readily. If they were going to go *that* far, they should have held out a little longer."

Lafier paused to think. While she couldn't rule out the possibility their commander was a hack, it *was* rather weird and ominous.

"What, if I may ask, do you think caused this, *Niso*th?"

"One possibility — and it's just a possibility — is that relations between the side providing rescue and the side getting rescued aren't all that smooth."

"I see."

That there was friction and discord within the Four Nations Alliance wasn't too surprising. After all, they had only joined hands because they had the **Humankind Empire of Abh** as their shared

enemy. The Hania Federation in particular had become a signatory to the Alliance, only to then profess their neutrality during the initial stages of the war. It was Hania's renunciation of its neutrality that led to the bitter and deplorable event the Empire knew as the Fall of Lahkfacar.

It appeared as though the Federation thought its entrance into the fray at the most opportune moment was a deed worthy of commendation. But there were also reports that the backlash was fierce.

The Empire didn't do alliances, but in the unlikely event it was forced to form an alliance with another nation, it'd first strike the Hania Federation off the list of candidates.

Lafier stared at the **Habameri Portal** displayed in the **planar space map**. Was it Hania's military that had secured the other side of the **Portal**? A fair number of forces had accumulated in Habameri, probably including mobile forces.

Lafier was very curious as to whether they would turn up to rescue their retreating allies. If they did, she would have no choice but to cancel the pursuit.

Two **conveyance ships** took off from within the *Clybnochec*. *Gnomboch* rode one while Lecsh rode the other.

Excepting **Fleet 4** (which was busy requisitioning the enemy ships they'd seized), all of the fleets were currently in pursuit.

Gnomboch and Lecsh couldn't have arrived yet, but Fleets 1.1 and 1.2 were transitioning into positions where they could curb the retreating enemy. They had probably gleaned what their newly assigned role was by observing the activity of the main forces. That being said, both fleets were just groups of ships without **command centers**. If they tried engaging without coordination, they would get smashed.

Lafier was worried about **Fleet 1.1**'s movements, because at this rate, they'd run into *Redic 102* alone, and if that happened, there was no way Fleet 1.1 could win.

Lafier checked where *Gnomboch*'s position was. He was already within **inter-bubble communication** distance of **Fleet 1.1**. It wouldn't reach its **flagship**, the *Loiféch*, without a relay, but a ship close to *Gnomboch*'s **conveyance ship** would serve that purpose. Though the information transmittance rate for **inter-bubble communications** was woefully slow, the not-exactly-voluminous message that the corps had been organized into a mini-fleet with a newly appointed commander did get through.

Eventually, **Fleet 1.1** altered its activities; discipline had taken hold. Troop cohesion was born in **Fleet 1.2** as well. They both

launched into **mine battle** against *Redic 102* at about the same time. The main forces of **Fleet 1** caught up with the enemy after it had already grown disordered, and thus commenced the trample-blitz. *Redic 102* dispersed, and some of the scattered ships surrendered while others were destroyed. No help from Habameri ever came for them.

Then, some information started coming in from **Fleet 4**. A strategy meeting was held at the **Thunderpeal Fleet Flagship** *Clybnochec*, where the information extracted from the enemy ships that Fleet 4 had requisitioned was to be evaluated. *Lamlonh* didn't hesitate to attend. Also in attendance were the **Commander-in-Chief** of **Fleet 4**, **Commodore** Dasehf, and a few of his **staff officers**.

Fleets 1.1 and 1.2, provisional as they were, were dissolved. The two who had been deployed as **Liaison Staff Officers**, *Gnomboch* and *Lecsh*, were seated at the seats of lowest distinction.

The first order of business was figuring out Habameri's defense situation. Depending on the gap in overall strength, they might have to temporarily retreat.

Lafier didn't feel ashamed of the prospect of needing to retreat. It wasn't the fault of the frontline commander that they lacked the necessary forces. It was **Emperor** *Dusanh* and Central that ought to feel ashamed. Of course, if she decided to retreat *without* needing to, then that would be an act of more than just shame.

It being the case that the Empire's strength wasn't very robust yet, they had to examine these things exceedingly carefully. And obviously, defeat would not be tolerated.

"This is doable," said Lafier, upon receiving **Senior Information Staff Officer** *Cnataii*'s report.

"Yes, ma'am. I too believe it's possible," said **Chief of Staff** Sobash.

Their analysis concluded that their fighting power exceeded that of the forces defending Habameri, despite the fact they'd run out of **mines**. Moreover, those forces seemed to specialize in 3-space warfare. While they could fight in planar space, they were not much of a threat there. The enemy likely intended to take the fight to **3-space**.

"We tried our hand at predicting what would happen if the enemy actively defended the area in **planar space**." Sobash pulled up a mock battle map. In the map, the battle progressed in the **Star Forces'** favor. The enemy merely squandered its valuable planar-space combat capabilities. If they were the least bit rational, they would not adopt such a stratagem.

The worst turn of events for the **Star Forces** would be them hiding away in the **3-space** side of the **Habameri Portal**. That was

what the enemy was probably aiming for. But even then, the Star Forces could win.

“Very well,” said Lafier. “We shall take Habameri.”

So it was that the **battle-line ship** corps were to fall back temporarily. **Battle-line ships** existed in order to fire **mines**, and so they were a hindrance in **3-space** combat. More importantly, as they’d already fired all of their **mines**, they had no fighting power anyway. As already decided, they were to make haste transporting **mines** from the rear. Though they may take Habameri, there was still Nohv Kinshass left to take.

Their present plan of action now settled, *Cnataii* moved on to the next report.

“Though only vaguely, the current state of the **Skeer Fleet** is now known to us.”

There was no urgent need to know, but Lafier was very interested indeed. “Speak.”

“First of all, it seems there can be no doubt your father is the commander of the **Skeer Fleet**. **His Highness Dubeus, King of Clyoov**, is calling himself ‘**Vice Emperor Dubeus**.’”

“‘**Vice Emperor**?’” Lafier was perplexed her father would give himself such a bizarre **title**.

“What a delightful **title**,” said *Lamlonh* softly. “*Dusanh Érumitta* will surely find it amusing.”

As usual, Lafier ignored her.

“Is there any intel as to the other personnel? What became of the **Snow Crystal Fleet**?”

“**Star Forces Admiral** Cohtponee, who was the **Commander-in-Chief** of the Snow Crystal Fleet, is alive and well. It appears she is serving as **His Majesty Dubeus’s** advisor.”

“What of the other **Imperials**?”

“I apologize, ma’am. Nothing is known about your brother yet...”

So they didn’t know what the **Viscount of Wemdyse** was up to.

“I didn’t ask about Duhier specifically.” She just hoped he was alive and well, regardless of what his title may be. “I’m asking for news regarding all the **Imperials** apart from my father.”

If her question was taken as solely inquiring as to her own family’s welfare, she was frankly shocked. The existence of **Imperials**, i.e. members of the imperial-family clans, was of great importance to the empire. The more **Imperials** there were, the more flexible the system could be. The **Skeer Monarchy** gave the viability of the Empire as a whole a boost, and that was why she was interested. Naturally, she was also interested in the current circumstances of her father and brother on a personal level, but this was not the place for matters concerning the **Royal House of Clyoov** in particular.

“I beg your pardon, ma’am. However, we do not currently have any intelligence regarding any **Imperials** apart from **His Highness the King of Clyoov**.”

“Okay.” A bitter pill to swallow, but she had no choice. “How is the **Skeer Monarchy** faring at the moment?”

“It appears the scope of their territory has shrunk drastically. The **Skeer Monarchy** no longer borders the PSSU.”

This news was a punch to the gut. “You’re saying **Skeer** is completely surrounded by the Hania Federation?”

“Yes, ma’am” nodded *Cnataü*.

“But even so, they’re hanging on, correct?”

“We believe so, ma’am.”

It was an unclear answer, but Lafier didn’t hound him. It took time for information to be conveyed in **planar space**. The latest available news didn’t always match what was going on out there.

“*Fiac Glaharérr*,” said *Lamlonh*. “I’ve a handful of questions I’d like to ask your **command personnel**.”

“By all means,” nodded Lafier.

As *Lamlonh* had been granted official authorization, her words were no longer just her commenting to herself. The **Information Staff Officer** faced the **Abdicant** with a nervous expression.

“The state of affairs surrounding the periphery of the **Skeer Monarchy** is terribly unclear.”

“Our apologies, ma’am.”

“I’m not blaming you. I just think it is strange. Why is it still so unclear despite how much of the enemy’s movements we have come to know? To be frank, I was expecting you to at least be able to show us an estimation-map of their current situation.”

“It’s because the Hania Federation is keeping their own nation’s state of affairs strictly under wraps, ma’am. We were planning to show it to you later, but here is the estimation-map of each of the major powers.”

A **planar space map** appeared over the floor. The area around the **Skeer Portal** was getting eaten away at by the FNA.

“It’s an enemy invasion squad coming from the **Skeer Portal**. More than ninety percent of it is estimated to be composed of United Humankind Peacekeepers forces. The other three nations have provided roughly equal numbers of ships, but their contributions are modest, and they’re limited to auxiliary roles.”

“So you’re saying that the UH is invading nigh unassisted,” said Lafier.

“That is correct.”

The majority of the territories formerly belonging to Area 2 had been swallowed up by Hania. The PSSU had also extended their

sphere of influence somewhat, but it was by a negligible amount.

“Is **Skeer** really alive and well...?” murmured *Lamlonh*.

“We can affirm that with a very high degree of accuracy,” said *Cnataii* with pride.

“Then Hania has made some peculiar moves. If they saw fit to have their forces foray into Habameri, I should think it would’ve been a higher priority for them to eliminate the threat posed by the **Skeer Monarchy** first.”

“Though it is not my duty to analyze the intent of Hania’s core,” said *Cnataii*, “there are some bits among the intelligence we’ve just obtained that only make sense if our military is active in the **Skeer** area...”

“I’m not doubting your abilities. Forgive me,” nodded *Lamlonh*, who then looked at Lafier. “What do you think, *Fiac*?”

“I think the reasons are likely political,” replied Lafier

“So you think so, too.” *Lamlonh* pondered the matter.

Lafier casually scanned the meeting room, and noted **Fleet 4 Commander-in-Chief** Dasehf’s eyes on her.

“If I remember correctly, you predicted that there was no chance Hania would send in large-scale reinforcements.”

“Yes, ma’am. I missed the mark,” said Dasehf, but he wasn’t diffident.

For the first time, Lafier wished to hear this young-looking old man go on. “Do you have any thoughts to share now?”

“The star systems of the Hania Federation are mostly economically interdependent. There are almost no systems there that are self-sufficient. Each system has a unique industrial structure, and they complement each other. And yet, they’re culturally homogenous to the utmost degree. Are you with me so far, ma’am?”

“I am, but I have to wonder if this has anything to do with the current war.”

Lafier had a general knowledge of how their enemy nations were organized. She didn’t need a general overview, and they hadn’t the time for a detailed one.

“It does,” nodded Dasehf. “Because the economies of each of the star systems hinge on interstellar trade, they desire stable space routes. A block in the interstellar flow of goods is a matter of life and death to the majority of them. They are, by their nature, a land people, and their ideal involves the multitude of planets being united as though it were one vast land. So long as it helps keep the planets of the Federation connected, the citizens don’t mind whether it’s their own **merchant ship company** or another nation’s that’s doing the trading. If ever the Federation were forced to yield its space routes to someone, they would not think the **Empire** a bad candidate, because

we don't meddle with the **landworlds'** internal affairs. It's their culture that is so very important to them. But there is a faction among them that doesn't share that sentiment, and that is the people who are involved in interstellar trade. They are few in number, but they are quite affluent, and their political power is considerable. Even the military bends to their will. To the space faction, they must be the ones to keep control over interstellar trade. There are many among them who, having taken part in interstellar transport for generations, have no sense of belonging to any **landworld**. Their sensibilities have diverged from the majority of their brethren's."

"I take it the Federation's foreign policy depends largely on them," said *Lamlonh*.

"Yes indeed. Most land peoples have no interest in what occurs outside the atmospheres of their planets. I suppose we shall call them the land faction. After all is said and done, the land faction far outnumbers the space faction. We can safely describe the space faction as a vocal minority. And there is much discord between the two factions. There are many among the land faction who believe they can entrust interstellar trade to the **Empire** with peace of mind precisely *because* it's an outside power. It was members of the land faction who spearheaded the failed attempt to surrender some days ago."

"But it's odd that they should have surrendered — at the time, there was no combat against the Federation," said Lafier.

"No, ma'am. The Federation was fighting; they just hadn't crossed swords yet. They were fighting the **Empire**, and at the same time, they were fighting the Three Nations Alliance. And they thought they could step off the fight by surrendering to the **Empire** for the time being."

"I hear what you're saying. However, I have a feeling this is going off topic."

"No, ma'am, this is the main point — they're forced to take into consideration the rivalry between the two factions whenever they act. We shouldn't overlook the aspect that surrendering to the **Empire** was the land faction's way of excluding the space faction. If the space faction hadn't gotten driven to a wall, then the Federation wouldn't have jumped back into the war, and Lahkfacar might not have had to fall."

"So it's like the Hania Federation has two different nations," said *Lamlonh*.

"That's right. We must always keep that in mind whenever we interpret their behavior. Only, I believed that the interests of both factions were aligned in this case, which is the same conclusion **His Majesty** and his **staff officers** must have come to. We believed that both factions wanted to maintain Hania's sphere of influence."

“Then which of those factions desired this outcome?” asked Lafier.

“It must be the land faction. I wager the space faction asserted that if they took Lahkfacar, the **Empire** would fall right then and there. Though that’s just my supposition. Ten years following the Fall, the **Empire** is still going strong. We don’t know the **Skeer Monarchy**’s situation, but regardless, things must have gone contrary to their expectations. As such, I imagine the land faction had forced the space faction into a bet.”

“A bet?” asked Lafier. She and *Lamlonh* exchanged glances.

“They will keep up their defenses against the **Skeer Monarchy**, but they’re placing their chips on sending out all of the rest of their space forces outside the Federation.”

“And should they have bet wrong?” asked Lafier, though she already half-knew what the answer would be.

“The space faction would lose power, and Hania would succeed in their next attempt to surrender.”

Chapter 11: The *Læmeco*th *Habameri* (Campaign to Conquer *Habameri*)

Whether Hania surrendered or not, they had to take *Habameri*.

The **Thunderpeal Fleet** stopped right in front of the **Habameri Portal**. This was because they had to wait for the arrival of supplies, particularly **mobile space-time mines**. Even this late in the game, the enemy had shut itself inside the **Habameri Portal** and refused to come out, apart from the small ships that emerged every once in a while (their purpose being, of course, reconnaissance).

The **Star Forces** could hardly let them do as they pleased. On the **planar space** side, ships were placed very near the **Portal**-spiral to chase after any enemies that appeared. Of course, even the **Star Forces** did not neglect to take a peek. Voyeurism had been a chronic disorder in the military since ancient times.

In **3-space**, **Thunderpeal Fleet 1** simply sent in its strongest **raid ships**. The enemy was also on guard. The military was voyeuristic, but it had no exhibitionist streak. In fact, it was extremely loath to be seen.

Just as the **Star Forces** were lying in wait on the **planar space** side, the forces of the Four Nations Alliance were fully prepared to intercept over in the **3-space** side. The recon-mission **raid ships** simultaneously passed through the **Portal** and shot out unmanned exploration probes in all directions, greedily soaking in information.

Yet at the same time, enemy rounds were zooming closer. Of the **raid ships** that were tasked with the recon-in-force mission, three were pierced by **lasers** immediately after passing through the **Portal**, one of them never to return.

However, thanks to their efforts, the enemy's situation had become quite clear.

In **3-space**, **portals** were phosphorescent spheres. In the *Habameri* system, the Portal revolved around its main planet, *Ceduroc*. And enemy ships had gathered in orbit around *Ceduroc* as well. Eighty percent were estimated to be Hanian ships. The rest belonged to the PSSU, but most of them were ships that had successfully withdrawn during the previous battle. The percentage of ships that were damaged must have been considerable.

Though they'd been able to gain an understanding of the enemy's movements and positions in the *Ceduroc* area, there was a possibility

that reserve forces were hidden behind a distant celestial body. Even bearing that in mind, however, the enemy's strength was deemed to be less than half that of the allied corps. If they faced off in **planar space**, the power gap was such that there was zero chance of defeat, but it was a little more precarious considering that they were the side pushing into the **Portal**.

Meeting after meeting was held at the **Overall Flagship Clybnochech** until supplies arrived. However, the outline of the operation had already been decided. Now all their work lay in assessing the information and, if that information called for it, making minor modifications to the predetermined strategy.

"The enemy's political situation has become quite evident," reported **Senior Information Staff Officer Cnatai** at a meeting. "To put it briefly, the PSSU is in a state of partial occupation by the Hania Federation."

"Occupation, you say?" Lafier was understandably surprised.

"Viewed objectively, it looks like what we'd call an occupation, but I think they probably view it differently," he explained with a wry smile.

It was said that the PSSU and the Federation, sensing an impending invasion, decided to destroy the **Thunderpeal Fleet** jointly. It seemed as though their **command centers** had been hurriedly amalgamated in the process. As Hania had invested the greater number of ships, they had more say in things. Though the main battlefield was situated in the PSSU's sphere of influence, the Supreme Commander was apparently a Hanian **commodore**.

As one might expect, there seemed to be some discontent amidst the **PSSU**. Furthermore, since the new system was created in haste, it was no well-oiled machine. The **command centers** at each level of command were all composed jointly by both militaries, but it appeared that internal conflicts flared up from time to time. And that resulted in the misfires surrounding the defense of Habameri.

It was also said that the Habameri Defense Forces' Supreme Commander was a Federation soldier. Since Habameri was an important military base to the PSSU, it had had a defense headquarters for a long time. With the strengthening of the defense forces, the size of that command center expanded in kind. The newly appointed commandant there seemed also to be a Federation soldier.

The operation up until that point had been intercepting attacks near the **Habameri Portal**, but the new Supreme Commander ordered a more aggressive, proactive counterattack. However, at that point, the reinforcements (whose core was made up of Federation forces) were on the move, and the Supreme Commander himself had not proceeded to his new appointment.

With no other options, the PSSU troops that had already taken up their positions sortied without help, and were defeated.

“Then is the Federation trying to chip away at the military power of the Union — its own ally?” Lafier couldn’t explain it any other way.

“Their intentions remain a mystery. If that is indeed the case, there’s no way they would admit it. Perhaps they’re merely that horrifically incompetent. If, however, the Federation’s plan was to have this battle whittle away at *our* forces before we engage with *them*, then it makes more sense.”

“But then how did they explain it to their allies?”

“As an operation to buy time, I imagine.”

It had been an operation to keep the **Star Forces** at bay until their defense was set up and ready. And it had yielded results. The **Thunderpeal Fleet** was currently at a stalemate before the **Habameri Portal**.

*Even so, thought Lafier, wouldn’t the simplest and most effective strategy have been to put all hands to the pump in a decisive battle in the **Portal’s** vicinity?* Lafier could only conclude that the Hanian military really did want to pare down the PSSU military.

“I see. So that’s what’s behind the occupation.”

Lafier was reminded of the **Watchguard Fleet** during the Fall of Lahkfacar. It wasn’t a pleasant feeling.

That fleet had been led by Lafier’s grandmother *Lamagh*, the 27th **Empress**. The predicament was similar in that they were forced into a losing battle to buy time. But the **Watchguard Fleet** had stepped willingly onto a battlefield bereft of hope in order to leave the **Empire** with that little bit more of a future, whereas these PSSU troops had been thrown forth so as to preserve the strength of the arrogant and overbearing Alliance. She kicked herself for even drawing a comparison.

It was then her **Adjutant** stood up. During the meeting, he processed a huge number of reports meant for the **Commander-in-Chief’s** ears. He usually saved them for later, but he informed her of whatever he decided she urgently needed to hear.

“*Glaharérh*,” Jint whispered to Lafier. “An **inter-bubble communication** has come in from **Vice Chief of Staff** Ecryua, who is now aboard the **battle-line ship** *Érsaumh*. It appears they’re headed here with the **mines** taken from **Fleet 5** in tow.”

“Let me speak to whoever’s in charge,” said Lafier.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Lafier’s **wristgear** put her through to the *Drociac Glagamr* (Command Center Communications Officer). Unfortunately, the information transmission rate with **inter-bubble communications** was glacial. The conversation could only be dreadfully slow-moving,

but she gleaned what she wanted to know for the time being.

Obviously, **mines** alone could not travel long distances. As such, Ecryua reloaded and returned with a **battle-line ship** that had withdrawn to Fahnbo due to running out of **mines**. She was the highest-ranked **starpilot** among the corps of **battle-line ships** coming in from Fahnbo. Some *glagamh iadbyrer bhotutr* (strike sub-fleet command centers) fell back, either to Fahnbo or to a base further back than it.

“It seems a **conveyance ship** has already departed from the *Érsaumh*. Details upon arrival.”

“I see. Good work.” Lafier cut the call with the communication operator. “I believe I shall have the **Associate Commodore** take command for the **mine battle**. Any thoughts?”

For this **mine battle**, they would be firing **mines** into the **Habameri Portal** in concert with the consort ships rushing through. No advanced command skills would be required.

“I worry about the **staff officers**,” said Sobash. “I’d like to have *Gnomboch* and Lecsh head there.”

“That’s fine,” nodded Lafier.

Gnomboch was dejected. *I’m a liaison officer* again?

While it was true that a stately position like *Casariac Byrer Raudrochotr* (Thunderpeal Fleet Staff Officer) was above him, considering his service record, he took pride in the fact that he’d worked assiduously by the future **Empress’s** side from a young age.

“Reaching the *Érsaumh* momentarily,” stated Lecsh. “Will **fuse** in ten seconds... seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, space-time fusion underway!”

Gnomboch and Lecsh were aboard the **conveyance ship**. Lecsh’s **rank** was lower than *Gnomboch’s*, so she was serving as the **Skipper**.

Space-time bubbles had strict mass limits, and only fit one **battle-line ship** inside, since they were so colossal. The *Érsaumh*, too, was projecting a **bubble** all by itself.

The **conveyance ship** came alongside the *Érsaumh*, and the two turned up at the **bridge** without delay.

Battle-line ships came with **command center** facilities such that they could serve as **squadron flagships** at any time. That was where Ecryua was, and she was alone. According to what they heard afterward, she’d left the assistants that she’d taken out of the command center with her at the Fahnbo Base Corps. Ecryua worked with **Fleet 5** and formulated a transport system that would function without her, but she had them stay behind for liaison work.

When the **battle-line ship** and **conveyance ship fused**, an **information link** was established between them, and a vast amount

of information was exchanged.

Ecryua was giving that information a read-through when *Gnomboch* and *Lecsh* entered the room, and by the looks of it, she had already grasped what she should do. She got the new-post greetings over with quickly, and issued her orders:

“**Vice Hecto-Commander** *Gnomboch*, you help with unit formation. **Deca-Commander** *Lecsh*, you compile all the info.”

“Roger that,” replied *Gnomboch* for the both of them. “We will get on it right away.”

And *Gnomboch* set about creating a unit formation plan on the double.

A short time later, *Lecsh* reported: “An **inter-bubble communication** from **Thunderpeal Fleet Command**: ‘Your corps is designated *Byrec Bipochceutena Raudrochotr* (Thunderpeal Fleet 3.1).”

“Uh-huh.” **Associate Commodore** Ecryua, who had just been appointed the *Glaharérh Byrer Bipochceutena* (Fleet 3.1 Commander-in-Chief), nodded disinterestedly.

What point on its other-dimensional counterpart a given position on the **planar** or **3-space** side of a **portal** corresponded to was determined probabilistically. In other words, it wasn’t clear where on the portal one would emerge when one crossed universes. In **planar space**, **portals** traced distorted spirals. In **3-space**, they were spherical. For example, say someone crossed the spiral at a certain point and emerged from the sphere at a certain point. Then say that person were to cross the spiral at the same point as before. They wouldn’t necessarily emerge from the sphere at the same point as before. In fact, the odds were overwhelmingly high that they’d enter **3-space** from a different point. This phenomenon also held true the other way around (i.e., crossing into the spiral from the sphere).

This physical law gave the defending side of a battle involving **portals** the natural advantage. Once the offending side passed through a **portal**, its formations would invariably end up in disarray.

The **Star Forces** had accumulated a wealth of experience fighting in **planar space**, and it had established a means of counteracting this, albeit one few would call perfect. Having both the warships and **mobile space-time mines** cross the **portal** at the same time was the oldest trick in the book.

The general rule was to cross over one ship-type at a time. That way, even if the ships belonged to different units or squadrons, they could coordinate with relative ease. **Thunderpeal Fleet Command** decided to send in first the **raid ships**, then the **assault ships**, then the **patrol ships**. All other types of ship would transition into **3-space** once the area surrounding the **portal** was brought fully under control. **Defense** and **battle-line ships** were indispensable in **planar space**,

but didn't have too much of a role to play in **3-space**. **Battle-line ships** in particular became nothing more than bleary-eyed targets. It was the **battle-line ship** corps, however, that fired the first rounds. In this battlefield, *Byrec Bipochceutena* (Fleet 3.1), commanded by **Associate Commodore** Ecryua, bore that task.

The vessels of the **Thunderpeal Fleet** assumed their places.

"An **inter-bubble communication** from **Fleet Command**," reported Lecsh. "The mine offensive schedule we proposed has been approved."

"Uh-huh." Ecryua nodded, then looked at *Gnomboch*.

"Issuing the order now."

The proposed schedule had already been conveyed to all of the **battle-line ships** under their jurisdiction. All that was needed now was to tell them to launch the mines as planned.

A short, predetermined code was transmitted by the **battle-line ship** *Érsaumh* via an inter-bubble communication, after which the *Érsaumh* itself prepared to torpedo the enemy. The **mines** that were snatched from **Fleet 5** were ejected, to sit inside the *Érsaumh*'s **bubble** temporarily. The **Ship Commander** had the authority to fire **mines**.

As *Glagamh Byrer Bipochceutena* (Fleet 3.1 Command) had been ordered to follow the originally planned schedule, they simply waited for their moment.

"It's time," said *Gnomboch*, who turned his gaze to the **planar space map**.

Mine after mine **split off** from the *Érsaumh*; small **bubbles** were also splitting off from other **battle-line ships**.

Then **Fleet 3.1**, having finished its first and last combat role, began falling back, passing by the advancing columns of the **patrol ship** corps.

The **mine** swarm slipped through the **assault ship** corps and approached the **raid ship** corps.

The **raid ship** corps went on the move.

Gnomboch shouted, a bit wound up: "Now charging!"

If this is how it's going to be, he thought, *I'd have liked to watch from the Commander's Bridge of the Clybnochec*.

The **raid ship** corps plunged into the **Habameri Portal** alongside the **mine** swarm. Viewed from the **planar space** side, it was a serene sight, but it had to be a very different story when viewed from the **3-space** side.

The **assault ship** corps started rushing through. The **patrol ship** corps were waiting behind them.

The *Glagac Daca Byrer* (Overall Fleet Flagship) slipped into the **patrol ship** corps and crossed over with them.

"...Five, four, three, two, one, passing through!"

The tension ran high in the **Commander's Bridge** of the **patrol ship Clybnochec**. The staff officers were busy compiling and analyzing information, as well as reorganizing their forces. Naturally, Lafier couldn't afford to just look on indifferently, either. She switched her *frocragh* from a personal radius to beyond-the-ship mode. The information crunched by the **patrol ship's** detectors and sensors traveled through her *froch* into the *rilbidoc* navigation area of her brain. The **staff officers** disappeared from her spatio-sensory world, replaced by the planet *Ceduroc* and its environs. She closed her eyes and focused her *frocragh*; she was now one with the **patrol ship Clybnochec**.

She quickly learned it was a melee out there. She gave up trying to get a grasp of the confusing space rumble by her own power. Looking at the information analyzed by her staff would not only be more precise, it'd be faster, too.

The *Clybnochec* brushed against the planet *Ceduroc's* atmosphere, and it felt to Lafier as if her own body brushed against it.

Mobile strongholds were lined up in orbit around the planet. Said strongholds were too heavy to travel through **planar space** as-is. Some of them had been constructed on *Ceduroc*, which was one large base for munitions and war industries, but more than half had been brought in from the Hania Federation. In all likelihood, they disassembled the **forts** tasked with defending Hania-aligned planets, transported the parts through **planar space**, and then reassembled them.

It might well be just as Dasehf said, thought Lafier. The chances that Hania was devoting the lion's share of its war resources to this front were seeming higher and higher. *I wonder how Father and Duhier are doing, considering they're supposed to be fighting against the Federation elsewhere.*

But she soon banished those thoughts; it was time to give the enemy before her eyes her undivided attention.

The amount of objects orbiting *Ceduroc* made it seem *dusty*, like a gritty sphere of space debris — destroyed ships, the fragments of **forts** and civilian facilities, and the remains of those who were resting in peace were among the debris hurtling into the planet's atmosphere, tracing countless streaks of light on their way down. And it wasn't just *matter* that *Ceduroc's* atmosphere had to contend with; leaked masses of **antimatter fuel** caused the outer atmosphere to shine as soon as it came into contact with anything else, including air.

"Tide-of-war analysis complete," said Sobash. "Entering it in now."

The fourth-dimensional space-time that Lafier "saw" through her *frocragh* changed; now, whether they were enemy ships, allies, or

neither, they stood out in sharp relief, making the state of the scuffle much more apparent.

She suddenly recalled her days as an **assault ship captain**. Back then, all she had to do was fight inside the cramped arena that was a **space-time bubble**. The assault came with a mood-elevating high that often made the crew muse that carnivores must feel the same way when they attacked their prey.

She chided herself — such uplifted moods were now impermissible. She needed to judge things calmly and with presence of mind.

She could see where in the battlefield things were flowing, and where things were stagnant. Allied ships were trying to move, but the enemy stood obstinately in the way. It seemed to her that with just a little push from a different direction, the obstacles would be removed, and the current would flow forcefully ahead.

Lafier pulled out her **command baton** and stood up. Then she pointed with the baton at the crowd of allied ships she perceived through her *frocragh*.

“Have those troops advance over here,” she said, moving the baton. “They’re to join with the troops here and then shoot the enemy’s flank.” Using the **baton**, she indicated the forces in question, marked them, and pointed out the path they were to take.

The space-time Lafier and her **staff officers** perceived through the respective **navigation areas** of their brains was synchronized. The movements of the baton that was physically being wielded on the **bridge** were also transmitted via *frocragh* to all the people that were physically present. The staff officers understood the instructions handed down by the **command baton**’s motions clearly and precisely.

Well, with one exception. Lafier recalled a conversation she’d had with Jint back when she was the **Training Fleet Commander-in-Chief**.

“Right, I get what you’re doing on an intellectual level,” he’d said, oddly forlornly. “But I don’t have *frocragh*, so to me, it just looks like you’re playing with a baton.”

Jint was on the **bridge** now, too. His **Adjutant** line of duty involved assisting with the **Commander-in-Chief**’s office and clerical work, so he was more than capable of doing his job without knowing how the battle was playing out at any given moment. Yet Lafier imagined he might feel somewhat alienated regardless. She was thinking about that kind of thing in the back of her mind even as she banished her **command baton** and gave directions.

In accordance with her orders, the staff officers formed temporary corps and assigned battle objectives. The effects were remarkable; gone was the melee, as order was born on the battlefield. Enemy ships

were getting pushed out of orbit around *Ceduroc*.

Jint never even dreamed Lafier might be worrying about him. Unlike the staff officers, an **adjutant** didn't have any missions to carry out during battle. As such, he might inevitably feel alienated even if he did have a *frocragh*. He often killed time by finishing up everyday business even as combat raged outside.

This time, however, he had no time to kill. Nor was this any time to be feeling left out.

"May I speak with your commander?" said the cross-looking elderly woman on the screen, who introduced herself as the Mayor of Pol City.

Jint didn't know the first thing about "Pol City," and the **compucrystal network's memory net** had no information on it besides the fact it was a city on the planet *Ceduroc*. The Mayor was claiming that some sort of structure crashed down onto the city's suburbs, and she was lodging a protest and a demand for compensation for the damages.

"I'm sure you understand how terribly busy our **Commander-in-Chief** is, Mayor," said Jint. "I believe we may discuss repayment of damages after the battle has concluded through the Habameri Star System Government."

Pol City wasn't the only one that wanted a word. Plenty of other local governments were also sending calls and messages to **Fleet Command**. Needless to say, Jint could hardly report every single one of them to Lafier. She was busy waving her baton around. Perhaps accepting the calls was a mistake to begin with, but they *would* have to get the government of Habameri to bend the knee later. They would probably counsel Habameri to surrender, and then negotiate. Laying the groundwork for those negotiations was the job of the **Adjutant** and his subordinates. As such, Jint wanted to prepare in advance by gathering information on the **landworld**.

"So you say," said the Mayor, "but what will happen if your side loses?"

"If we should have the misfortune of being defeated, we would have no other option but to retreat," he replied politely, as astonished as he was that she would take this line.

"Of course. And if that happens, how will we get compensated?"

"Perhaps you could file that request with the People's Sovereign Stellar Union?"

Their intel stated that the PSSU was effectively already occupied by the Hania Federation. Yet despite knowing that, that didn't stop Jint from making that suggestion. He was trying to get her to confirm that that was indeed the case.

She didn't take the bait. "According to our investigation, the fallen

structure that inflicted such severe damage to my city is a vessel belonging to your military.”

“All the more reason to seek compensation from the Union then, ma’am. Our forces are an injured party in this,” he said, as he inwardly prayed for the souls of the **soldiers and personnel** whose ship got shot down.

“If your military never started a battle here, there wouldn’t be any injured parties at all.”

“Ah, Mayor,” said Jint, unable to give her any more of his time. “We wish to build a rapport with the fine folks of your planet. That’s why we are paying heed to your concerns even in the midst of combat. However, as I stated earlier, we would like to negotiate regarding reparations through the star system government. We don’t currently have any plans to discuss these matters with local governments.”

Jint meant to cut the call then and there, but the second he was about to, a declaration he couldn’t ignore came flying out of the Mayor’s mouth: “The star system government no longer exists.”

“Pardon me? Are you saying that the star system government has been dissolved?” Their intel said nothing of the sort.

To be sure, there had been no call request from the star system, which had always been essential up until now. This had baffled Jint, and he’d had half a mind to ask for a compiling of demands, but as an **adjutant**, he lacked the power to contact them unilaterally from his side, and he figured it was nothing to bother the **Fleet Commander-in-Chief** over when they were in the middle of combat.

Ceduroc’s news reportage was of course being tapped. The **Information Staff Officer** was in charge of that, and it wasn’t as though an **adjutant** like Jint would be informed if something as important as the star system government disappearing came to light through their efforts. On the other hand, the **Star Forces** traditionally paid little interest to **landworld** circumstances, so they didn’t bother reading between the lines — the news was merely recorded. If, hypothetically, a media blackout were implemented, the Star Forces might not even notice, especially since they were locked in combat. The **Information Officer** had a lot of other tasks to prioritize.

“It still exists on the books, of course. But it’s a shambling zombie — a corpse puppeteered by a parasite.”

“Would that parasite be... the Hania Federation?”

If the PSSU was truly subordinate to Hania now, then their being controlled at the star system government-level came as no surprise. Moreover, this was no ordinary planet — it was a military base.

“Who can say?” said the Mayor evasively.

“You believe that your military has been taken over, even as it’s

currently fighting against our military?” asked Jint. “And that’s why you won’t file your complaint with the PSSU?”

“All I’ll say is, it’s a fact that the fleet is no longer under Central’s control. Otherwise, they would never take our young ones out to die someplace far from home without resisting, don’t you agree?”

“Central” must be referring to the PSSU’s central government. And she was blasting the military for launching a sortie from Habameri. Whatever their relationship with the Federation actually was, she clearly wasn’t fond of the PSSU’s current state of affairs. Jint reckoned she might even regard the Empire as liberating them from the Federation’s clutches.

“Be that as it may, I am unable to answer with any kind of authority, nor can I have the **Commander-in-Chief** discuss this with you. Now then, if you’ll excuse me.”

Jint really did cut the call this time. He gazed at the screen in front of him; a slew of call requests were displayed there, but none of them were from the star system government. They were all from local governments. There were other call requests from private organizations and citizens (which obviously couldn’t be replied to, given the sheer volume of calls), but those were filtered out. Jint nearly winced at the giant list, but he decided to start with the one at the top — the call from the Province of Inanna.

The elderly man on the other side introduced himself as the Governor of Inanna Province. “I know you must be quite busy, but I would like to make a brief comment.”

“What is it, sir?” asked Jint guardedly.

“Thanks to you all, the sky is so very beautiful. I mean it when I say the night sky tonight is dreadfully beautiful. Truly, this night has stirred my soul.”

“Is that so?” This offended Jint. “I would be pleased if you could bear in mind that that beauty has brought with it the deaths of officers in both our militaries, for starters.”

“You go out of your way to wage war all the way up in space. Surely death is not such an abominable thing to you people? You think it an honor, do you not? Though we find that difficult to understand.”

Pure prejudice, thought Jint. He didn’t, however, see the point in correcting the Governor’s distorted views. “We acknowledge your thoughts regarding the sky. Will that be all, sir?”

“No, I’ll be getting to the real issue at hand now: I have had my fill of this dazzling night sky. That’s enough now. I would like you to close this show down posthaste.”

“So you’re requesting a suspension of hostilities?”

“Indeed.”

“If so, I advise you to take it up with your military. The battle is progressing in our favor. Your military has but to surrender, and then there will be no reason to continue fighting.”

In truth, as Jint wasn't a **staff officer** and didn't possess *frocragh*, he didn't actually have a grasp of the war situation. He simply concluded they were winning from the conversations and overall atmosphere on the **bridge**.

“Our military doesn't exist. Or at least, not in this system.”

It seemed the Governor of Inanna held the same point of view as the Mayor of Pol.

“Are you saying that you perceive the current battle as a battle between our **Imperial Star Forces** and the Hanian military?”

“No. It's the **Four Nations Alliance** military.”

“From what we understand, sir, your nation is a member of that Alliance.”

“Well, at the very least, we can be sure that your military isn't fighting a PSSU fleet.”

The Governor was being evasive, but this hardly shocked Jint anymore. “Allow me to just confirm something — are you in contact with the star system government, sir?”

“We can contact them when necessary, of course.”

Jint felt relieved. “The star system government still exists, then, right?”

“They carry out day-to-day affairs for us.”

“That sounds like a very diplomatic way to put that, sir,” said Jint frankly.

“I suppose it does,” shrugged the Governor. “Your military is already abreast, I imagine?”

“What might you be referring to, sir?”

“That the star system government originally intended to declare the system open and undefended.”

“What?” Jint blinked. “It may just be because I'm not familiar with your nation's legal system, but that sounds strange to me. Is such a thing possible?”

“It was just the system flexing its sovereignty. In the PSSU, star system governments have state sovereignty.”

“I see.”

So the star system's government got purged because it rebelled, huh? While Jint was personally very curious as to whether that was true, that went beyond Jint's job description. In addition, he was exasperated that this might cause an unforeseen roadblock in negotiations with the star system government.

“We're getting a signal of surrender,” reported the **Communications Staff Officer**. “All enemy ships are transmitting the

signal of surrender simultaneously.”

The star system government aside, the enemy fleet had capitulated.

Jint heard the pride in Lafier’s voice: “All ships, cease fighting. Order the enemy ships to stop accelerating. I hereby allow attacks on enemy ships that continue accelerating without legitimate cause.”

Jint grinned and told the man still on his screen: “Governor, I have some good news for you.”

Sadly, it wasn’t all good news on the **bridge**.

“The **antimatter fuel factories** have begun self-destructing. What seem to be ship construction and repair facilities have as well...”

“Tell the enemy fleet to stop the destruction sequence,” ordered Lafier, albeit with a somewhat resigned tone. It was most likely a waste of effort. They didn’t know who had given the self-destruction order, but that person probably did so knowing they would be held accountable for it. There was no way that person was going to cancel those orders now, and everyone at the **bridge** knew it.

Jint felt depressed. While the Empire and the **Star Forces** were more penny-pinched than in years gone by, they hadn’t fallen so low as to target and depend on the enemy’s assets. That being said, having access to them certainly would’ve helped. Even in the **Star Forces’** heyday, they would’ve liked to get their hands on those resources intact, because then they could expect a reduction in time spent voyaging.

Even if the voyage ended, though, Jint had no home to return to. Since the war started, the **Count of Hyde’s Manor** kept moving from one combat vessel’s residential quarters to another. So long as Lafier’s **staff officers** weren’t discharged, he would probably have to continue living on the *Clybnohec*, but whether they were in the battlefield or at the rear had an effect on his mood. And above all, he had a frugal disposition one wouldn’t expect from a **noble** like him, so the fact that useful facilities had been destroyed was hard to accept.

“So what’s this ‘good news’?” asked the Governor innocently.

Chapter 12: The Area 2 Fleet

Two years had passed since **Operation Woodpecker**.

In accordance with **Vice Emperor** Dubeus's policy, **Area 2** had shrunk to an extremely cramped range centered around the **Sescarr Portal**. The sole star system under its control was the **Sescarr Viscountdom**, and it was surrounded entirely by Hania's sphere of influence.

Though the Federation occupied the surrounding **territory-nations** and **domains** previously belonging to the Empire, they refrained from attacking Sescarr. It was thought that the **Four Nations Alliance** was being cautious because in exchange for the reduction in Area 2's size, its defensive capabilities rose by leaps and bounds.

But Duhier knew there was a different reason.

His title was now *Glaharérh Byrer Bibaürér* (Picket Fleet Commander-in-Chief)-cum-**Vice Emperor Special Envoy**. The **Vice Emperor Special Envoy** title clung to Duhier like a curse now that they had temporarily abandoned all of the **territory-nations**.

The *Glagac Byrer Bibaürér* (Picket Fleet Flagship) was the **patrol ship** *Hoücaüi*, aboard which Duhier was heading for *Saudec Danmata Brasr* (Brahs Portal 772). The ship was accompanied solely by two other **patrol ships**.

In **planar space**, *Cœc Mata Frybarer* (Empire Area 2) enjoyed effective rule over the **portals** near the **Sescarr Portal**. Military outposts had been placed near seven of those **portals**, and maintaining those outposts was another of the *Byrec Bibaürér* (Picket Fleet)'s important duties. But where Duhier was going, there wasn't even an outpost. **Brahs Portal 772** wasn't truly ruled by the Empire; it was more so that it belonged to *none* of the great powers. And that was of course because **Brahs Portal 772** had next to no utility. But it did become useful to both the Empire and the Federation for a very short while.

"We've passed through **Brahs Portal 772**," reported the **Navigation Staff Officer** on the *Hoücaüi*'s **Commander's Bridge**.

The closest star to **Brahs Portal 772** was a white dwarf 14.7 light-years away. Save for the phosphorescent light provided by the **Portal** itself, it was safe to call this perpetual darkness.

A point of light shone in the pitch dark.

“Craft identified. It’s the Minmindia,” reported the **Exploration Staff Officer**.

Duhier nodded, and addressed the woman sitting next to him: “It seems your ride has arrived.”

“Understood. I have naught but gratitude toward the **Empire’s** good-faith reception and hospitality, but I do miss seeing my family’s faces, so I am rather glad.”

Her name was Yu Jina, and she was a secret Hanian parlementaire.

The Empire and the Federation were currently at war, and there were no diplomatic relations between them, yet the parlementaire was accepted under the veil of absolute secrecy. Only a select few among the Empire and the Federation were privy. Not even Hania’s allies knew. Or rather, the fact they were surreptitiously building new relations was something they had to hide from the other nations.

It was said that when the **Area 2 Fleet** first accepted a parlementaire, it was in the middle of the Battle of the *Læbehynh Ūruber* (The *Ūrubec* Marquessate), which happened before **Operation Woodpecker** was launched.

At the time, Duhier hadn’t known. He’d only been told about the parlementaire’s existence a month after **Operation Woodpecker** ended. Since then, there was always a secret Hanian parlementaire at **Area 2’s** central hub, though not without changes in who served the role. Yu was the fourth. Of course, as far as Duhier knew, there could be more parlementaires that he was kept out of the loop on.

The parlementaires could not get in touch with their nation. They could but carry out the mission they were given when they were dispatched. And thus far, their main mission was... to report what the procedure for rotating to the next parlementaire was.

For indeed, one of the reasons that the fact of the Empire having covert contact with the Federation’s core hadn’t been made public was that the results had been poor.

The new parlementaire that would be replacing Yu was aboard the “Minmindia.” Incidentally, “Minmindia” was a code name. He didn’t know what its actual name was. By that same token, the **patrol ship** *Hoücaï* was known by the other side as the “Guhäl.”

The two ships whose true names were unknown to one another drew alongside each other. Duhier took his **staff officers** to the boarding doors. Needless to say, Yu, who was stepping down, was with them too.

The doors opened, and the new parlementaire appeared before them. He was carrying a small white flag in hand, and he was in Hanian military uniform, though something about him gave Duhier the impression he wasn’t used to wearing those clothes.

The man came before Duhier and saluted. "I am Colonel Om Reekn, here to represent the Hania Federal Military."

"I welcome you on behalf of the **Humankind Empire of Abh**. I am *Abliarsec Néic Dubreuscr Duhirh*, **Viscount of Wemdyse** and **Vice Emperor Special Envoy**."

"Ah!" Om's eyes went wide. "If I'm not mistaken, '*Fiac Duhirr*' (Your Highness Duhier) is '*Fiac Cilugair*' (Your Highness the Crown Prince). It is truly a tremendous honor."

Maybe this is Hanian-style banter, thought Duhier, but he decided to react to this remark earnestly and correct him. "The **Vice Emperor** Dubeus is indeed my father, but he is not our **Emperor**. Nor have I been designated as a successor. As such, I am forced to inform you that that statement is in error. Nevertheless, I'm honored by that remark, however erroneous it may be."

"My apologies," smiled Om.

Duhier concluded from that smile that it had been in jest after all, and he inwardly heaved a sigh.

Yu stepped forward and exchanged words of greeting with Ohm, along with some more tangible objects.

Must be some sort of memchip. But Duhier pretended not to have seen.

Before long, they were done conversing.

"Now then, *Fiac*," said Yu, who saluted Duhier's way, "I thank the Empire for the warm hospitality I received. Unfortunately, given my position I can't wish for eternal prosperity for your nation, but at the very least, I can and will pray for the health and safety of all of you."

"Thank you very much." Duhier saluted back. "I hope you become able to enter a quiet and secluded life of leisure surrounded by the people you love, and sooner rather than later."

"If the Federation should be unable to pay my pension, will the Empire look after me and my family?" She let out a chuckle and stopped saluting. "Now then, everyone, it is reluctantly I part with you, but part I must."

And so Duhier watched as Yu exited through the boarding doors alongside her **automated luggage**. Then he addressed Om: "This way, please. We have prepared a welcome feast for you. Forgive us, for the banquet is a modest one."

"Oh no, sir, from what my predecessor tells me, there's nothing modest about it!" replied Om cheerfully. "I've been looking forward to it. Nonetheless, I take it you will hurry back even in the middle of the feast."

This ticked Duhier off. Getting their route dictated by a person from an enemy nation was unwarranted. But Duhier was mature enough not to let his annoyance show. His reply was intentionally off-

point: “Please rest assured we will escort you safely to see the **Vice Emperor.**”

“I stand very much obliged by your thoughtfulness, but making the utmost haste would be advisable.”

“Oh? Has something come up?”

The smile never left Om’s face as he whispered into Duhier’s ear: “Your sister’s **fleet** has begun invading the People’s Sovereign Stellar Union. I wish to have an audience with **His Highness the Vice Emperor** and return to my post along with your nation’s parlementaire as soon as possible.”

Chapter 13: The Habameri Star System

Duhier's sister was utterly swamped with all the preparations necessary for conquering Nohv Kinshass. The **Thunderpeal Fleet** had set up a base of operations in the **Habameri Star System**, and the **flagship** *Clybnochec* was orbiting the planet *Ceduroc*.

"This summary will include information we've already reported," said **Chief of Staff** Sobash, "but please allow me to notify you of the changes in theater of operations that have occurred over the past twenty-four hours."

Lafier received a report regarding the state of affairs every morning from him. A **planar space map** was projected on the floor on which they stood. As viewed from Lafier's standpoint, the **Habameri Portal** lay on the left, and the *Saudec Nobh Cinchasr* (Nohv Kinshass Portal) on the right. The **map** was colored in regions of blue and red, signifying the sectors they and the enemy had secured, respectively. The stretch of blue starting just to the left of the **Habameri Portal** kept shifting into a different hue as it went on. Effectively, the blue took on a red tinge and turned purple. Then that purple became redder and redder. The space that lay between the **Habameri** and **Nohv Kinshass Portals** was very red indeed.

The red sector had two horn-like protrusions, formed by **Fleets 2** and **4**.

"**Fleet 4** has gained control over the Boonia Star System. In so doing, it has reached its tentative halting point."

"Right," nodded Lafier.

Fleet 4 did have some strength remaining, but making them invade on their own would just increase the level of danger to no end.

"**Fleet 2** is headed toward the *Saudec Anzicer* (*Anzicec* Portal). If things are going according to schedule, they should be entering into the conquering phase."

Communications over vast distances always came with a time lag, so whether they were on schedule or not wasn't a certainty.

"**Fleet 1**, meanwhile," Sobash continued, "is undertaking reconnaissance, just as initially planned."

A fair number of white blips appeared within the band of purple, representing the estimated locations of the **patrol ships** of **Fleet 1**. Some of their number had reached the vicinity of the **Nohv Kinshass**

Portal.

Bitterly, Lafier stared at the **Habameri Portal** in the **map**. “Can we still not go on the move?”

Fleet 3, the Thunderpeal Fleet’s main force, was still rooted to Habameri. There was too much to be worried about regarding their force of arms to launch a full-fledged offensive. They were lacking **mobile space-time mines** in particular.

“Our **mine** sufficiency percentage is around seventy-eight percent,” said Sobash.

“It’s taking longer than expected, isn’t it?”

“I am truly ashamed, ma’am.”

“I’m not blaming you.” Instead, Lafier blamed the top brass for being far too optimistic. Their underestimation of the Hania Federation’s will to fight in particular had set this operation very much on the wrong foot. Though of course, she didn’t and wouldn’t voice that opinion. The one she ought to tell was in the **Mobile Imperial Palace**. Bringing it up in the **Commander’s Bridge** of the *Clybnochech* would be pointless.

I do have someone else to criticize, too, thought Lafier. To her, her father was being surprisingly feckless. If the **Skeer Fleet** had maintained their sphere of influence, then the tide of war would have differed immensely. But it was no use dredging that up here and now. *I just hope I can sound off to Father directly someday.*

“Fortunately, *Byrec Loceutena* (Fleet 11) is operating smoothly. They’re expected to arrive as planned in thirty-seven hours’ time.”

Byrec Loceutena Raudrochotr (Thunderpeal Fleet 11) was a fleet formed for the purpose of resupply. Supply-train transport was **Fleet 5**’s job, but things were larger-scale this time, so a fleet was specially formed for this. **Fleet 11** contained a number of newly constructed combat vessels, but it was mainly composed of **supply ships**. It was scheduled to be dissolved once it reached Habameri. And it was naturally going to be bringing more **mines**, too.

“What will the percentage be once **Fleet 11** arrives?”

“Around ninety-five percent, ma’am.”

“That can hardly be called ideal.”

“Indeed, ma’am,” nodded Sobash. “We should, however, begin the battle to capture Nohv Kinshass with less-than-ideal mine counts. May I explain why?”

Sobash’s suggestion didn’t come as a surprise, but she figured she should hear him out anyway. “Speak.”

“Thank you very much.”

The **map** on the floor zoomed into the **Wesco Portal** area. Three blips flickered at different points near the border they shared with the enemy sphere of influence.

“As you can see, enemy activity is high in the **Wesco Portal** sector. Three battles had taken place there of which we had yet to receive any report. I would be pleased if you could look at the details sometime later.”

“Is it necessary?” asked Lafier.

“No, ma’am,” Sobash smiled wryly. “It’s certainly true that those engagements, taken individually, are not terribly important. Yet the chances are high that this series of battles were reconnaissance-in-force. It appears **Fleet 1** is picking a fight with the PSSU.”

“Are you saying that the likelihood we will be getting hit with a counter-offensive from the **Wesco Portal** area has increased?”

“Yes, ma’am. That is the conclusion we have reached,” he replied, referring to his **staff officers**. “To tell the truth, the opinion that **Fleet 11** ought to be merged with **Fleet 5** was floated.”

“That would be too defense-focused,” said Lafier.

“I believe so, too, so I quashed the idea,” smiled Sobash. “The one who proposed the idea is still young. I can’t be sure they’d be able to withstand an Abliar’s wrath.”

“I am *not* that narrow-minded,” said Lafier huffily.

“In actuality, I simply dismissed the idea because I too thought it overly passive. We should focus on moving forward rather than defensively hunkering down.”

“You’re right,” Lafier heartily agreed. Sobash truly was a splendid **chief of staff**. “That’s what we’ll do. I’d like to launch an offensive the moment **Fleet 11** arrives. There haven’t been any notable shifts in the enemy’s state of affairs, have there?”

“No, ma’am. As for the Nohv Kinshass area, reinforcements have arrived, and it seems they’re broadening their reach there. A new group was discovered around eighteen hours ago, though their total mass measures at around a mere three *zaisaboc*.”

That was the weight of ten **battle-line** or large-scale supply ships. Whether they were combat vessels or just carrying supplies, they wouldn’t really have much of an effect on the situation. If, however, similar groups of reinforcements kept entering the picture uninterrupted, then it would be nothing to sneeze at.

“I’d be grateful to at least know whether they’re from the Federation or the UH...”

“Sadly, they’re too deep inside for reconnaissance-in-force to be effective.”

The newly discovered group of enemy ships lay past the **Nohv Kinshass Portal**. It was outside the reach of even the long arm of **Fleet 1**.

What irritated her was not knowing where the reinforcements to the PSSU were coming from. If they just went by what direction they

were coming from, then they were Hanian ships. But even if the allied nations provided help, the shortest route was from Lahkfacar through the **Clyoov Portal** and through Hania's sphere of influence. Of course, no matter whose forces were before them, all they had to do was lay into them. It was just that she wanted to know whether they were extracting troops from Lahkfacar for this.

"Now then," said Lafier, "I'd like you to display the battles that occurred since *Glagamh Byrer Ghuta* (Fleet 5 Command) moved to the **Spohntnebryoov Astrobase**."

A quizzical look crossed Sobash's face, but he replied: "Roger that."

The floor-projection returned again to the **planar space map** of the **Wesco Portal** area. There were more blips of light than before. More than eighty percent of the enemies were UH Peacekeepers. Lafier fixed her eyes on the map, and decided to air what had been weighing on her mind: "Can we take *Gnomboch* and Lecsh off their current missions?"

"We can make the necessary adjustments. What do you plan for them to do?"

"Operational research. I'll have them look into whether it's possible to lure out and destroy enemy forces from Lahkfacar through the **Wesco Portal**."

Sobash looked amused. "The plan being to lure them out, destroy them, and then retake Lahkfacar at a stretch?"

"All I'll be having them look into is whether those ships can be exterminated. Our objective being to secure the safety of our supply routes."

"*Glaharérh*," said Sobash, shaking his head forlornly. "Are you saying that you would be happy concluding this campaign with a feast celebrating our victory in battle even though the **capital** might finally be sitting undefended?"

"Forgive me," said Lafier, apologizing for trying to deceive him. "I still wish to have them at least research the matter."

"You can call it 'just research,' ma'am, but the retaking of Lahkfacar is too much for them to handle."

"It is?"

"Even if it were possible, as **Chief of Staff**, I think putting a stop to the idea would be the correct thing to do."

"Because it defies our imperial command?" They had been granted permission to retreat, but they weren't permitted to unilaterally change where they were to attack.

"That shouldn't be for me to say. I am not your overseer, *Glaharérh*. It's not my position to judge whether that course of action complies with our imperial command."

“Then why?”

“The window of opportunity has passed, ma’am. It’s too dangerous to make the fleet reverse course here and now. Instead of having the two look into such a dangerous strategy, I would rather they complete the tasks before them.”

“They have until **Fleet 11** arrives,” said Lafier. “Or is that out of the question?”

“No, ma’am. If you command it, no refusal can be permitted. Let’s just mentally categorize the two as ‘bedridden due to a grave illness’ during the time they’re conducting this research.”

“You think the endeavor is that pointless?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he asserted. “What are your orders?”

Lafier saw herself as having gained her fair share of experience, and as having matured. But she could feel the stubborn little girl that hated losing as yet residing in the recesses of her heart. And troublesomely, she adored that little girl and generally yielded to her demands.

“Take *Gnomboch* and *Lecsh* off their current tasks and have them research the strategy. But have them return to their original tasks once **Fleet 11** arrives.”

Sobash raised an eyebrow, but he saluted right away. “Roger that.”

The regularly scheduled report now over, Lafier entered her office. Once again, she had more boring reports on her plate to review. But today’s session seemed different from the norm. When she took a seat, a hologram of Jint appeared before her.

“Good morning, *Glaharérh*. The number of items I would like your stamp of approval on has piled up quite high, but *Nisothe-Fanigar* requests a meeting with you.”

“*Nisothe-Lamlonr*?” Lafier was surprised.

“I told her that I would reply after setting the time. I believe the optimal time would be before lunch. Depending on the matters to be discussed, might I suggest you have lunch alongside **Her Eminence**? If you concur, I will reply to her to that effect.”

Lafier thought about it. She had a solid guess as to what *Lamlonh* wished to discuss. She just never thought she would do it this soon. Besides, it was nothing to meet face-to-face over.

“We can’t do it via a call?”

“Is a call what you desire, *Glaharérh*?”

“If it can be done through a call, then yes. If *Nisothe* doesn’t mind, then I wouldn’t mind a call with her right now. If she insists on meeting face-to-face, then arrange the meeting as you suggested.”

“Roger that. Please wait a moment.” Jint’s expression swiftly

switched from subordinate-mode to friend-mode: “This is you getting bad times over with quick, right?” he added under his breath.

“It’s not as though I have fun doing the work *you* give me.”

But his hologram had vanished by then. A minute later, it returned. He was the consummate **Adjutant**. “I have just gotten in contact with **Her Eminence**. She is coming on the line.”

Lafier straightened up, and *Lamlonh* appeared via video call.

“Good morning, *Nisoht*,” said Lafier, bowing her head reverently.

“Morning, *Fiac*.” Scorn resounded in her the **Command Center Abdicant’s** voice when she uttered Lafier’s **title**.

So I guess I did earn her displeasure, thought Lafier.

Lamlonh was allowed to freely peruse all fleet info. She knew both that Lafier had put two young staff officers to work researching a strategy, and also what that strategy was. She must be thinking she had to stop the young **Commander-in-Chief**.

“Are you stripping my right of command?” asked Lafier, who was feeling combative.

“So short-tempered,” said an astonished *Lamlonh*. “Short-tempered individuals appear from time to time in the *Néic Dubreuscr* Clan. That aside, you appear to know why I’m calling.”

“Yes.”

“In deference to your short temper, I’ll get this over with quickly. I’m sure this goes without saying, but I don’t poke my nose in trivial personnel affairs. Do however you please.”

“Thank you very much.”

“However, our leader is currently *Dusanh Érumitta*. We must obey the man.”

“I understand that. That being said, *Nisoht*,” she continued, unable to keep it bottled up inside, “our mission may be to clear a path connecting us to the **Skeer Monarchy**, but the preconditions for that are no more. Namely, **Skeer** needs to be bordering the PSSU for the plan to make sense. Yet as you’re aware, **Skeer** is now enclosed by the Hania Federation...”

Lamlonh raised an eyebrow, as if to say: *I know*. “That’s not what I understand your — no, *our* mission to be. Our mission is simply to capture Nohv Kinshass.”

“But doing so was only ever for reestablishing contact with **Skeer**.”

“You are correct. If we capture Nohv Kinshass, then the PSSU will collapse, and a path connecting us to **Skeer** will open. That was what **His Majesty** believed. And as you pointed out, the preconditions for that have crumbled away.”

“Then why? Could it be that you put stock in **Commodore Dasehf’s** theory, *Nisoht*?”

“Dasehf’s theory? Oh, you must mean the idea that if we take Nohv Kinshass, even the Federation will surrender, to say nothing of the PSSU. I don’t particularly ascribe to that notion. All I’m saying is that no matter what does or doesn’t happen after we take Nohv Kinshass isn’t your responsibility.”

“So I should just faithfully carry out the mission I was given. That’s what you think, *Nisoeth*?” she asked, her voice getting louder despite herself. She thought she was being underestimated and undervalued.

“That is correct,” said *Lamlonh* coolly. “Thinking about where the war or the **Empire** are headed is a good thing, but you should only think about such things on your own time. And you certainly should avoid dragging your subordinates into it.”

“So I shouldn’t make that our mission?”

“You don’t have the qualifications for that yet,” stated *Lamlonh*. “Are you under the impression you’re a power player in the chess game of history, *Fiac*?”

Hearing her **title** pronounced with the utmost scorn like that, Lafier’s resentment mounted ever higher. Anger threatened to wash away her rationality. This was no time for her to say a word.

The Abliar elder was staring straight into Lafier’s eyes, not perturbed in the slightest. Lafier gradually regained her composure.

“Are you saying history sees me as nothing more than a pawn?”

“Most of humanity can’t even reach the level of a pawn. It’s okay to take pride in that, *Fiac*.”

“With all due respect, *Nisoeth*, I will be the one to decide what I take pride in.”

“But of course. My apologies, *Fiac*.” This time, her “*Fiac*” was not scornful but amused. “In any case, you don’t have the authority to alter where the sword-edge of the fleet is pointed. Or, you don’t yet have that authority.”

“I of course understand that full well. I would never alter it of my own accord. I intend to do so only after taking my opinion to His Majesty and receiving his sanction.”

“Then I’ve no qualms. If our imperial command changes, then I too can but follow.”

But Lafier wasn’t about to let the conversation end there.

“Do you think me misguided, *Nisoeth*?”

“*Fiac*.” *Lamlonh* smiled a strangely tender smile. “I was never all that brilliant a **soldier**.”

“I’m sure that isn’t true.”

“If you’re an Abliar, then you ought not lie for so trivial a reason as currying another’s favor,” said *Lamlonh* sorrowfully.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“As proof I wasn’t a brilliant **soldier**, I never made it past **Commodore**, and I got demoted back to **Hecto-Commander** after committing a horrid mistake. Seeing you as you are now reminds me of the way I was back then. But the **Empire** can rest easy, because you’re a higher-grade **soldier** than me. As such, I have no intention of assessing your thinking.”

“I understand your view, *Nisothe*.”

“Don’t tell me you wanted to hear me say ‘I agree with you?’”

“Perhaps I did,” admitted Lafier.

“It appears you’re of two minds. But I will neither agree nor dissent. What’s in my authority to do is limited, and giving you advice isn’t in my list of powers. If you stray away from our imperial command, I am to warn you. If you don’t see the error of your ways, then I am to arrest you and appoint a commander to replace you. That duty is the sole reason I’m here.”

“I understand that. And this is your warning, I take it.”

“Correct. By the way, *Fiac*, do you plan to retract the new mission you gave those two?”

“No, I don’t,” she said flatly.

“I see. Now, I’ll be on my way. Do devote yourself to the mission, *Fiac*.”

Lamlonh disappeared. That parting “*Fiac*” had an oddly contented tone to it.

Chapter 14: Nohv Kinshass

The final stage of **Operation Thunderpeal**, the Taking of Nohv Kinshass, had commenced.

The enemy fleet had split into two groups sandwiching the **Nohv Kinshass Portal**. **Thunderpeal Fleet Command** referred to them by the simplest of monikers: the Left and Right Divisions. Of course, there had to be forces stationed in the Portal itself. This battle formation was an extremely orthodox one, capable of handling all manner of situations.

The **Thunderpeal Fleet** was also assuming an orthodox formation. The vessels of **Fleet 1**, which lay ahead of the advancing **Fleet 3**, were in the process of amassing. **Fleets 2** and **4** were drawing closer so as to serve as the armada's left and right wings. The specter of the upcoming battle hung in **planar space**.

"Hanian forces form the core of the Right Division, and PSSU forces, the Left," reported **Chief of Staff** Sobash. "Each Division's war power is estimated to be near equal."

"Are there any updates regarding the power gap between us and them?"

"No, ma'am. As I reported earlier, the enemy's power is thought to be around eighty percent of ours."

"I see." Lafier nodded bitterly.

"The power gap runs counter to **Star Forces** tradition," said Sobash.

His tone was jocular, but it was a true statement. It couldn't be helped that they had to fight defensively sometimes, but traditionally, when they launched an offensive, they thrashed the enemy with overwhelming might. That was **Star Forces** tradition. Yet unfortunately, the **Empire** as it currently stood didn't have the luxury of observing many of its traditions. Even though observing that tradition would have reduced their losses, were it possible. Right now, the Star Forces had the upper hand, but only barely. Calling this "overwhelming might" would be an embarrassment.

"Oh well. Let's do our best for the sake of the **Empire** and our officers." She had braced herself for having to rough it since **Operation Thunderpeal** began.

"I understand what you wish to say, *Fiac*. You're wondering whether we should include the extermination of the enemy fleet in the

list of primary objectives.”

“Yes, I am.”

In order to capture Nohv Kinshass, the most logical course of action was to head straight for the **Nohv Kinshass Portal**. Of course, the left and right enemy divisions would endeavor to either surround the **Thunderpeal Fleet** or attack it from the sides. But Lafier would have Fleets 2 and 4 handle that.

She was confident victory would be theirs, but **Commodore Dasehf**’s theory was nagging at her. He’d contended that if they could make the PSSU surrender, the Hania Federation would follow suit. It was difficult to believe, given how sweet a deal that would be, but if they exterminated the Federation’s fleets, then the possibility seemed likelier. However, the current level of the power gap meant victory was not assured if they made that an objective of theirs. They might even get counterattacked and be forced to retreat.

“But in reality, you’ve already decided, haven’t you, *Fiac*?” Sobash looked at her searchingly.

“Yep,” she nodded.

The **Thunderpeal Fleet** drew yet closer to the **Nohv Kinshass Portal**; the time was becoming ripe for battle.

“Multiple **bubbles** emerging from the **Nohv Kinshass Portal**!” reported the **Exploration Staff Officer**. “They appear to be enemy ships.”

“The strength of the fresh troops is within the range of our estimations,” said Sobash. “I’m designating them the Front Division.”

Lafier nodded. “Stay the course, and remain at this speed.”

The **Thunderpeal Fleet** clumped together, and was heading straight for the **Nohv Kinshass Portal**. In their bid to encircle the Thunderpeal Fleet, the Left and Right Divisions came nestling in.

“Their teamwork is surprisingly coordinated, isn’t it?” Sobash opined.

The Left and Right Divisions were each keeping an equal distance away from the **Thunderpeal Fleet**. That couldn’t be a mere coincidence.

“Commence **mine battle**,” ordered Lafier. “Aim for the Left and Right Divisions.”

The Front Division was still too far away, so the **Thunderpeal Fleet** fired **mines** at the Left and Right, though the density of the mine swarms varied. There were far more mines headed for the Right — for the Hanian fleet.

And that wasn’t all. The **Thunderpeal Fleet**, which had been advancing toward the **Nohv Kinshass Portal**, changed course, steering in unison toward the Right Division.

The enemy fleet fired their own **mines** as well. The **mines** blasted

against each other in a fierce fracas, and **planar space** frothed with vast quantities of **space-time particles**. The Left Division suffered next to no damage, but the Right Division, the receiving end of a dense death cloud, wasn't so lucky. **Mines** that had made it through the mine-on-mine clash landed one after the other, tearing up the Right Division's formations. The **Thunderpeal Fleet** pushed its way through the waves of space-time **particles** and approached the Right Division. The Left Division deployed to fly after them.

"Very well then. Tell **Grand Commodore** Atosryua to trample-blitz," ordered Lafier.

The ranks of **Fleet 1**, Atosryua's fleet, was mixed in with **Fleet 3's** ranks. **Fleet 1's** ships cleared swiftly away from **Fleet 3**, passing through **Fleet 4** as well and flying out to the front of the pack. All of **Fleet 1's** ships charged toward the enemy in the full-speed **mobile-state**.

Lafier decided to exterminate Hania's armada first. It was a foolish plan if the aim was solely to get the PSSU to surrender. The ships that had been amassed in Nohv Kinshass's defense were what few forces they had to their name. If the Star Forces annihilated them, the PSSU would be forced to capitulate. Alternatively, the quickest way to claim victory might be to attack Nohv Kinshass directly. Yet if Dasehf was correct, then destroying the Hanian fleet was the way to go. Though Lafier had her doubts the Federation's "space faction" even really existed, it would cause them to lose power, and war-weariness to inundate the Federation. And there was another reason to attack Hania's fleet first besides Dasehf's theory. If the only military to be annihilated was the PSSU's, it was far from inconceivable that the Federation would swoop in to occupy the territories that were left to the PSSU. If that happened, then their prime objective of reestablishing contact with the **Skeer Fleet** would only fly further away.

When one gained the title of **Fleet Commander-in-Chief**, they had to contemplate things without laser-focusing. The thinking of the Lafier of the past was more of a straight line as she'd viewed the enemy in simpler terms: to her, the enemy ships had been nothing more or less than the combatants they had to defeat, and she hadn't particularly cared which nations those ships belonged to. But she had realized in the time since then that what she once thought homogenous was surprisingly complicated. If she became **Empress**, she would have to ponder that more complex side of things, and if she weren't duty-bound as an Abliar to do so, she would have liked to quit aiming for the **throne**.

For the first time ever, Lafier thought about an institutional defect of the Empire. Being a **soldier** was an Abliar's calling. They were too

good as people to be politicians. Being Abliar-like might not necessarily be such a boon when it came to carrying out an **emperor's** work. The thought that perhaps a Sporr would be better suited to being **Emperor** occurred to her, but she promptly squashed the notion as abhorrent.

In any case, she had already gotten through with all this onerous deliberation. The current situation was clear and simple. They had only to crush the Hanian fleet before their eyes.

Lafier glared at the **planar space map**. **Fleet 1** was tearing the Right Division to pieces.

“Charge,” Lafier ordered quietly, hiding her elevated spirits inside her.

Fleet 4's battle-line and other ships fell back, and **Fleet 3's patrol** and **raid ships** were accompanied by **assault ships** as they sprung out to the frontlines and rushed into the hole that **Fleet 1** bored through the enemy, thereby widening it.

She hoped the PSSU would forsake the Hanian ships, but that was unsurprisingly too much to hope for, as they weren't that foolish. The Left Division chased after the **Thunderpeal Fleet** from the rear, and the Front Division, which had appeared from beyond the **Nohv Kinshass Portal**, advanced so as to strike their flank. Lafier left both divisions to **Fleet 2**.

Fleet 2 Commander-in-Chief Commodore Pianzehk was handling the enemy deftly. **Fleet 2** stretched its ranks all the way to the nose of the Front Division, holding out against the Left Division's aggression all the while. The two divisions fired furious **mine** volleys at **Fleet 2**, but it had incorporated more than the typical number of **escort squadrons**, which reduced the damage they took.

There were no imminent threats from the rear or the sides. Lafier was relieved, and she pressed the onslaught against the Right Division.

“The Right Division has begun to fall back,” reported Sobash.

Lafier glared at the **planar space map**. “They're... running away?” she murmured.

From the looks of it, those ships weren't falling back in order to regroup.

“It seems as though they're withdrawing from the battlefield to me, too,” said Sobash. “I suppose this means we've fulfilled our duties.”

“Isn't it too soon?”

“You mean it ended sooner than you anticipated, **Your Highness?**” Sobash shrugged.

“That too, but I imagine the PSSU is also feeling letdown.”

“Their alliance seems fragile at best. I'd like to ask **Commodore Dasehf** his thoughts on the matter...”

Lafier winced just from seeing Dasehf's face in her mind. "You have surprisingly strange interests."

"I've an interest in humankind. But I shall save that for when I'm off the clock."

"You'd best do so."

"Now then, your orders, ma'am. What will you do?"

"Calculate what the end result will be if we focus on exterminating the Right Division."

If they pursued the Right Division, i.e. the Hanian fleet, they would of course have to veer away from the **Nohv Kinshass Portal**. She knew exterminating them was probably in the cards given the power gap, but what she wanted to know was how that would leave the map of the battlefield. The flow and currents of **space-time particles** were roughly akin to the weather and topography of **planar space**. They never, however, changed abruptly. Now that they had more or less grasped the enemy's fighting power by crossing blades, they could make such estimations through plugging in the variables into their cool-headed calculations. The only unknown variable was the enemy's intentions, but they could simply run with the supposition that the Hanian ships would do what allied ships would loathe most — flee, flee, flee.

The computations were soon complete. It would take more than a hundred thirty-seven hours by the *Clybnoche*'s time to exterminate the enemy fleet. During that stretch of time, the battlefield would stray from the **Nohv Kinshass Portal**, and the **Thunderpeal Fleet**'s formation would stretch so far as to become slack. It would take time to put their formation back in order, resupply, and set about conquering Nohv Kinshass. In fact, it would likely require them to withdraw for the time being.

Lafier gave up the chase. If the Right Division intended to reenter the fray, then they'd engage them again. If they fled unhampered by any sense of obligation to defend the main star system of the PSSU to the last, then that was fine too. It'd just mean that they managed to get rid of around forty percent of the enemy's firepower with minimal losses of their own.

"It's time we condense our formation, too. Shift to Formation 8."

"Roger that." Sobash bowed.

The **Thunderpeal Fleet** came to a halt, and the distance between them and the fleeing Right Division increased. **Fleet 1**, which was protruding out the farthest, veered right. It went to the opposite side of the **Nohv Kinshass Portal**, as viewed from **Fleet 3**'s standpoint. **Fleets 3** and **4** moved their **defense ship** corps in the **Nohv Kinshass Portal**'s direction.

"Hit them with mines," ordered Lafier. "We're going to chip away

at the Front Division.”

The bellies of **Fleet 3's battle-line ships** had plenty of **mines** left, and they were all ejected en masse. The Front Division launched a mine counter-offensive, but the numbers couldn't match up. Not a one of the PSSU's **mines** reached the **Thunderpeal Fleet**, but the **Star Forces' mine** swarm swooped down on the Front Division, though it was full of gaps by the time it reached them.

The Front Division proved surprisingly tenacious, holding firm despite eating multiple mine blasts.

“Results aren't forthcoming,” Lafier found herself grumbling.

“They are tough, aren't they? It seems as though they've amassed some escort ships,” said Sobash. “Since it's not very effective, I would like to reduce the scale of the **mine battle**. Would that be okay?”

“Yep. Let's spare them for later.”

Lafier was staring at the planar space map. The Left Division was merging with the Front Division, while the Right Division seemed to be bolting away from the battlefield at full speed. The reason why the formation was stretching out was that all their **bubbles** were in the **total mobile-state**, without any thought spared to defense. They could safely forget about the Right Division for the time being.

The boundary between the Left and Front Divisions disappeared. The enemy fleet was erecting a bulky defensive formation in front of the **Nohv Kinshass Portal**.

“Shift to Formation 6. Get ready to charge them. Tell Atosryua to maneuver for a pincer attack.”

After allocating work to the **staff officers** so as to put the **Commander-in-Chief's** instructions into action, Sobash smiled her way: “I daresay **Admiral Sporr** will be envious.”

“She will, won't she?” It was the kind of flashy strategy the **Archduchess of Laitpanh** loved. However, what Lafier liked, at bottom, was a solid and reliable strategy. That was only natural for an Abliar like her. Actually, it was not a matter of what she liked or disliked. It was owing to her duty to her **soldiers** that the operation needed to be formulated with humility and her hand on the reins needed to be steady. She simply settled on a pincer attack because she deemed it the most effective — and not because it was a thing of glory.

Lafier was glad the doubt that had creeped into her heart earlier lay dashed. So long as the **Emperor** was the Supreme Commander of the **Star Forces**, it was an Abliar who was best suited for the **throne**. A smile suddenly curled her lips, and Jint gave her a quizzical look.

The **defense ships** within Fleets 2 through 4 fell back, and the **assault ships** pulled forward. Then, the **patrol** and the **raid ships** began to veer left. Meanwhile, Atosryua's **Fleet 1** veered left, zooming

out from behind the main forces before outstripping them. The main forces' **patrol** and **raid ships** joined up with them as they proceeded to make their way past the enemy fleet. Even as it got bombarded by enemy **mines**, **Fleet 1** remained unperturbed. Before long, it had wedged itself between the enemy fleet and the **Nohv Kinshass Portal**.

Lafier's command rode on the **space-time particles** and reached her ships: "Charge."

The **assault ships** charged forth in total mobile-state **bubbles**. Lafier watched them fly through the **planar space map**. The cluster of total **mobile-state bubbles** then split back off the enemy ships. There was no enemy mine volley. It was then Lafier knew they'd won.

"How many **mines** are left?" asked Lafier.

"About twenty-three percent."

"Fire them all to back them up."

"Roger that."

The **battle-line ships** fired all of the **mobile space-time mines** they had left. The cluster of **mine bubbles** caught up to, and then outstripped, the **assault ship bubbles**. They crashed into the enemy fleet almost the instant they outdistanced said bubbles, and they began fusing with those of the enemy. Several of those fused bubbles ruptured, leaving only a swelling surge of **space-time particles** in their wake. The ranks of the enemy fleet steadily collapsed, and **Fleet 1** went around and cut in from behind.

Fleet 1 turned its columns into rows and whaled on the enemy fleet, which rapidly hemorrhaged troops. The Right Division was far from the battlefield now, and it was still retreating at full speed. Even if they about-faced right now, they would not arrive in time to help. By the same token, the Star Forces had also lost their chance to give chase.

The **Thunderpeal Fleet** had hewn the Left and Front Divisions to pieces. The two groups tried assembling into one so that they might put up a resistance that was even just slightly more effective. As they were now mixed and there was no point in distinguishing which ship belonged to which division, it was designated the Joint Division. Lafier reckoned the Joint Division would be the last PSSU fleet in history.

"A signal of surrender from the Joint Division," reported the **Communications Staff Officer**.

The PSSU fleet had given in. It was joyous news, but the **bridge** was silent, and Lafier's heart was also calm. The mood was one of relief.

"Cease combat. Tell all enemy **bubbles** in the **mobile-state** to halt at once. If they don't obey, then open fire," she said, issuing all the usual commands for the occasion. "All ships of Fleets 2 and 4 are

to seize the enemy's ships. **Fleet 1** will scout out the **Nohv Kinshass Portal**. And keep maintaining a close eye on the Right Division's movements."

Having finished handing down that string of orders, she sat deep in her seat and took a breather.

A sweet fragrance wafted into Lafier's nostrils. She was proffered some hot **peach juice** with a floating lemon wedge. She looked up, to find Jint there, smiling.

"You're going to be getting very busy," she said as she picked up the vessel.

The **Fleet Commander-in-Chief** was also a diplomat. Negotiations with the PSSU would be taking place in the not-too-distant future. Lafier intended to follow Empire tradition and keep things dead simple, but even so, the paperwork and items to negotiate would come in abundance. Fortunately for her, it was her **Adjutant** who'd do almost all of it for her.

"I know, I know." Jint flashed her his characteristically uneasy smile.

The **patrol ships** of a squadron within **Fleet 1** were sent out, and passed through the **Nohv Kinshass Portal**. One of those ships returned right back to **planar space** and released a **conveyance ship**, whose bubble **fused** with the **Overall Flagship Clybnochec**. Nary a moment later, they conducted an **information link**.

"We have received a request from the **conveyance ship**," said the **Communications Staff Officer**. "They would like to report directly to you, *Fiac Glaharér*."

"I'll listen," said Lafier.

The **conveyance ship's** nervous-looking **Skipper** appeared on the main screen. She bore the **rank insignia** of a **vanguard starpilot**. "There is no resistance to speak of," she reported. "In **3-space**, we received a call from the PSSU government requesting a ceasefire."

"Can you put them through?"

"Yes, ma'am."

The main screen switched to a Lander man. "I am the President of the People's Sovereign Stellar Union, Arz Amani. I've already ordered our forces to cease fighting. I have high hopes your forces will stand down, too."

Lafier nodded and told Sobash: "I accept. See to it that all of our ships know they're forbidden to engage except for self-defense purposes."

She recorded a video response to the PSSU President. A **conveyance ship** belonging to the *Clybnochec* then carried the video file and headed for the **Nohv Kinshass Portal**.

Eventually, they heard from **Fleets 2** and **4** that they'd seized the

enemy ships.

“Now then,” announced Lafier, “we’re proceeding to the **Nohv Kinshass Portal**.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Sobash smiled cheerfully.

The other **staff officers** were also grinning. And as might be expected, Lafier, too, was in high spirits. One of the interstellar powers was about to vanish off the galactic map — and by her hand, at that.

“This is the proposed order of entry into Nohv Kinshass. Do you approve of it, ma’am?”

A window-screen floated up before Lafier’s eyes. She approved of it without even really looking at it. “Let’s get going.”

Fleet 1 entered Nohv Kinshass first, followed by **Fleet 3**. The **Overall Flagship Clybnochec** flew at **Fleet 3**’s head.

“Passing through the **Nohv Kinshass Portal** in ten seconds.” The **Commander’s Bridge**, too, harked to the countdown: “...Five, four, three, two, one, passing through.”

In **3-space**, the **Nohv Kinshass Portal** orbited the main planet of the *Cïioth Nobh Cinchasr* (Nohv Kinshass System), Kyle Gohnbeh.

The PSSU President was telling the truth. Many **mobile strongholds** orbited Kyle Gohnbeh, but they weren’t flying into combat.

Fleet 1 Commander-in-Chief Grand Commodore Atosryua saluted on the main screen.

“This star system is decidedly peaceful, *Glaharérh*.”

“I’m pleased to hear that,” nodded Lafier. “Are the **antimatter fuel factories** damaged?”

Though not to the same level as the **Empire’s Bosom**, there were multiple large-scale **antimatter fuel factories** in the area of Nohv Kinshass’s sun. If they’d self-destructed, it would have been a brutal loss.

“No, ma’am. They’re still operational. We have made it known that destroying them will not be tolerated, and we have sent a squadron at maximum acceleration to guard it.”

“Good job.” *Jint’ll be pleased*, thought Lafier. Of course, it was good news for the fleet and the **Empire**, too.

Before long, all of the ships of **Fleet 3** crossed into **3-space**, and **Fleet 2** began passing through the **Portal** after it, accompanied by seized enemy ships.

“A call for you from PSSU President Amani,” reported the **Communications Staff Officer**.

Lafier stood up and ordered the call be put through.

“I am the **Crown Princess** of the **Humankind Empire of Abh**, the **Commander-in-Chief** of the **Thunderpeal Fleet**, and the

Viscountess of Parhynh, **Imperial Admiral Abliarsec Nēic Dubreuscr Boerh Parhynr Lamhirh**. Not to get straight to the point, Your Excellency, but will the People's Sovereign Stellar Union surrender?"

"**Your Highness**," said Amani with panache. "As its Supreme Commander, I have ordered our military to surrender. But the nation can't surrender yet."

"At this moment in time, I understand, *Lonh*," said Lafier. "However, allow me to clearly state that we have no intention of acknowledging any option apart from surrender."

"I imagined as much. I'd just like for you to be forgiving."

"You may not believe it, but we always endeavor to be forgiving."

"I plan to see your leniency with my own eyes during the negotiations to come."

"Yes, so you shall. By the way, Your Excellency, according to our information, **soldiers and personnel** from another nation are working as part of your military. Have they agreed to surrender as well?"

"I have ordered the military personnel of our former ally to be disarmed and detained."

"Good. Now, I'd like to introduce the person who will be in charge of the negotiations."

"Arrangements have been made to send a special envoy wherever your military deems fit."

"That will take too long. I wish to seize some of your nation's facilities. In particular, I would like to place the **antimatter fuel factories** under our military's control posthaste. Given that your military has surrendered, we will requisition your military facilities without reservation, but I understand that your **antimatter fuel factories** are civilian facilities. Please give us your permission."

"You have an abiding respect for the law, I see."

She thought this was perhaps a wisecrack, but she decided to take it as a statement of fact.

"We prefer not to pillage or plunder. But that's merely a preference. We won't balk at doing so if necessary. We would like to work out an honest deal if possible, but we value speed even more."

"Understood. By the law of our nation, the state can't cut civilian facilities free. If you could inform us of the facilities you wish to seize, our government will mediate and obtain the consent of the individuals with the right of management."

"We'll send a list. Putting that aside, I'd like to talk about your nation's surrender." Lafier beckoned for Jint to come closer. "Let me introduce my **Adjutant**, the **Count of Hyde**. I wish to put him in charge of the negotiations."

Her introducing him by his **noble rank** was Jint's idea. When it

came time for negotiations with politicians of other nations, one's **noble rank** was of more value than one's **military rank**. "The '**Count of Hyde**' makes me sound more like the big shot I'm not than **Quartermaster Kilo-Commander Lynn**," he'd said with a smile. That was why he'd reacted unperturbed to the unusual mode of introduction.

"I look forward to working with you, Your Excellency."

The President seemed surprised. "But that face... that hair... oh, excuse me. It's nothing."

"If I'm not mistaken, you wish to say that my appearance is different from the Abh norm," said Jint smilingly. "I get that all the time."

"It's just, well, I didn't think a Lander would possess a peerage, so I was taken by surprise. I have nothing against you, *Lonh-Dreur*."

"Please don't concern yourself, *Lonh*. All cultural spheres have their presuppositions," nodded Jint. "May I ask you to introduce who's in charge of negotiations on your end?"

"Apologies. We'll be selecting the person for the job shortly."

"Understood," said Jint cheerfully. "Now then, allow us to call you in one hour's time."

"One hour..." The President was dumbfounded. "Please understand that our structure is based on a democratic bedrock. It will be impossible to settle on an individual to take on a role this important in just an hour."

"We understand. If the position isn't decided on in an hour, we will call again an hour later." Jint signaled to Lafier with his eyes.

"Now then, I bid you wait for the **Count of Hyde**'s call. With this, I'm closing communications for the moment."

"*Glaharérh*," said Sobash, once the call ended. "Shall we send a report-bearer?"

"Report-bearer" was the word for the post that reported the results of an operation to the **Emperor**. It was customary for a staff officer to serve in that role.

Nohv Kinshass had fallen, but the People's Sovereign Stellar Union still existed. As for reestablishing contact with the **Skeer Monarchy**, that wasn't even in sight yet. It felt half-cocked even just to report that **Operation Thunderpeal** had concluded successfully, which must have been why Sobash asked that question. Yet Lafier made her decision quickly:

"Yes. I'd like for this to be reported to **His Majesty** without delay. We do have to consider what's to come."

"Whom do you wish to send?"

"Ecryua. And *Gnomboch* as Vice Envoy."

She could feel Ecryua's eyes on her. The woman was as

expressionless as ever, but they had known each other for a fairly long time, so Lafier could detect her disapproval. Lafier could almost hear her say: *I'm getting sent out again?*

Lafier didn't think Ecryua was a hindrance or anything. She had a high opinion of her abilities. She exhibited her skills in spades when she nabbed the **mines** from Sporr's **Fleet 5**. Lafier expected much of her. In fact, Lafier didn't plan on making her a mere victory-report messenger. She had to make use of her for the next operation.

"Do you mind if you leave it to me, **Chief of Staff?**"

Sobash nodded, and Lafier stood up.

"Come, Ecryua, *Gnomboch*. I have something to tell you."

While Lafier spoke with the two staff officers, the ships of **Fleet 4** emerged into **3-space** as well. The space around Kyle Gohmbeh was packed.

The **Thunderpeal Fleet** possessed five **airship squadrons** — three in **Fleet 3**, and one each in **Fleets 2** and **4**. The **airship squadrons** of **Fleet 3** remained in orbit around the planet. **Smallcrafts** flew out from inside the **airship squadrons' supply ships** and headed for the PSSU's strongholds and vessels. Every nook and cranny of Kyle Gohmbeh's surface was scanned, revealing the locations of anything that looked like a military installation. Airborne troops headed for them aboard **traffic ships**.

Meanwhile, the **airship squadron** of **Fleet 2** headed for the system's outer planets in order to requisition the asteroid mines and the hydrogen wells installed in gaseous planets. **Fleet 4's airship squadron** headed for the system's sun in order to requisition its **antimatter fuel factories**.

Seventeen hours following the PSSU's capitulation, Jint's PSSU counterpart was decided upon.

The **Empire** had never before allowed an interstellar power to continue to exist after surrendering, and it would stick with that policy with regard to the PSSU. However, that didn't mean that simply ignoring the PSSU's government was a wise move. The optimal way forward involved dissolving that government only after a peaceful transition of control. That way, any confusion or chaos could be kept to a minimum. Jint was conducting the preliminary negotiations for the purpose of the peaceful dissolution of the PSSU, which were conducted via transmissions between the PSSU government (located on the planet's surface) and the *Clybnochec* (located in orbit above it). Not much progress was being made.

While the government wasn't surrendering, the **Star Forces** steadily turned Nohv Kinshass into a base of operations. They secured existing **antimatter fuel factories** around Nohv Kinshass's star in

addition to installing the **mobile antimatter fuel factories** that accompanied the fleets. Civilian ship construction/repair facilities were requisitioned to repair Star Forces warships and remodel captured PSSU warships. Ten days later, the Star Forces had made itself very much at home; a **mobile base canteen** was stationed in orbit over Kyle Gohmbeh.

Someone in the position of **Fleet Commander-in-Chief** could hardly stroll carefree through a **base canteen**. However, the title did come with perks. Using her privileges, Lafier had connected the *Colbéic Difaca* (Crown Princess's Interim Palace) to the **flagship** *Clybnochec*. The *Colbéic Difaca* was made of anti-radiation resin, and it sported almost twice the *Clybnochec*'s volumetric capacity. It contained a rose garden at its center, and when Lafier felt inclined to do so, she gathered her executive staff and held meetings there. They were unofficial, but depending on the topic of conversation, it wasn't out of the question to take a turn for the serious.

The **Command Center Abdicant**, *Lamlonh*, was also in attendance at the day's meeting. As if to declare she was merely listening in, she was drinking some tea at a table she had set up a distance away from the meeting table. The dome over the rose garden was transparent, and the planet Kyle Gohmbeh was suspended in the sky.

"I was told that even if the PSSU government surrenders, that won't mean that each individual star system will do so," reported Jint.

"I knew it," nodded Lafier. "I must say, though, they're taking their sweet time. Are they stretching this out on purpose?"

The Empire's greatest matter of concern was whether or not the many star systems that were not yet occupied would be turned over smoothly.

"That may be, ma'am. They had the gall to say: 'the PSSU government doesn't have the right to order each of its star systems to surrender,'" said Jint.

Jint was usually mild-mannered, but today he looked beside himself with indignation. The negotiations must have ticked him off something fierce.

Lafier was secretly delighted. *Serves you right.*

"Then we won't be obtaining the PSSU's cooperation?" asked Sobash.

"Oh no, we have already been given each star system's data, including classified information, and it's all currently being analyzed. We've also been promised that if any information is lacking, they will provide us with more. Plus, I don't know whether we can call it 'cooperation' per se, but after the PSSU government surrenders, they've said they will dispatch 'sovereignty restorers' to each star system."

“What’s a ‘sovereignty restorer?’” asked Lafier.

“The PSSU government was operating under the pretense of being ‘entrusted’ with each system’s sovereignty. Once the PSSU government surrenders, that sovereignty will lose all basis, so they’re restoring it to each individual system.”

“Meaningless nonsense. That sovereignty will of course go to us. Nothing is getting restored to anyone.”

Fleet 5 had already set about annexing the PSSU territory stretching from the border of its former sphere of influence to Habameri. From what the reports were telling them, the **Fleet 5 Commander-in-Chief, Star Forces Admiral Sporr**, didn’t pay such matters of sovereignty any mind. If she found out about these “sovereignty restorers,” it would certainly amuse her.

“We banned interstellar travel in the PSSU as a general rule,” said a puzzled Sobash. “Are they asking us to approve **interstellar ships** for the restorers’ sakes?”

“I reminded them of the interstellar travel ban, of course. In response, they said they’re willing to have them take passage aboard our military’s ships.”

“Oh, what a generous offer,” said Sobash sarcastically. “How do you feel about this, **Quartermaster Kilo-Commander Lynn**?”

Jint shrugged. “To be frank, it’s beyond my grasp, but it seems like it’s important in the PSSU’s eyes. If you approve of their dispatch, it might serve to soothe their souls.”

The citizens of the PSSU would soon become **landworld citizens** of the Empire. Like most of her Abh brethren, Lafier wasn’t really interested in public sentiment on **landworlds**, but she did care enough to want them to feel comfortable transitioning to **landworld citizens**.

“The dispatch of the restorers will come *after* the PSSU government surrenders, right?” asked Lafier. “We can’t afford to wait.”

“They say they want us to let them send restorers to systems that our military has already gained control of,” said Jint. “Bearing that in mind, I don’t believe they will mind if it happens after the annexation is complete.”

“It’s almost like a funeral for the interstellar nation known as the PSSU,” said the **Fleet 4 Commander-in-Chief, Dasehf**.

“If that’s what this is,” said Lafier, “then we’ll pay them the respect they’re owed. I don’t, however, plan to go along with their funeral up to the point it slows down our schedule. First, we schedule the capturing of the star systems. Then, if and when it’s possible, I’ll approve of giving the restorers a ride.”

“Roger that,” said Jint. “I will lead the negotiations in that

direction.” He sat back down.

“Now then,” said Dasehf, “shall we set out soon for the post-harvest picking? Our subordinates have been resting for too long, and are beginning to get bored.”

Fleets 2 and 4 were in charge of disarming the Alliance forces and incorporating the yet-unconquered star systems past Habameri. This was the “post-harvest picking” to which Dasehf referred.

“Pull up the **planar space map**,” said Lafier.

The **map** floated up above the conference table installed in the rose garden. They were receiving moment-by-moment reports of the situation. The Hanian fleet was still squatting in PSSU territory, having amassed in the Emicooshi Star System.

It was really quite ironic. From the start, Emicooshi had been established and maintained as a military base to be provided to Hania. However, following the formation of the Four Nations Alliance, its importance diminished, and it kept scaling down from there. Once the war broke out, the Federation chose to be neutral, and despite breaking off their alliance with the other nations, the base wasn’t reinforced. Yet now, it seemed it was returning to its former stature by Hanian hands.

“Hania hasn’t occupied any PSSU star systems, right?” asked Lafier.

“No, ma’am,” said Sobash. “There are no signs of that at this time. It seems they’re allowed to station themselves at Emicooshi due to an accord. However, we are unsure what their relationship to Emicooshi’s **landworld** is like.”

“We should launch a preemptive attack,” proposed **Strategy Staff Officer Lecsh**.

Lafier glanced at *Lamlonh*, who was snacking on confectionaries with a look of feigned innocence.

“We can’t do that, Officer Lecsh,” said **Fleet 2 Commander-in-Chief Pianzehk** with a no-nonsense expression. “Taking Nohv Kinshass was the mission our fleet was granted. It’s very probable that we’ll soon be ordered to clear a path to the **Skeer Monarchy**, but right now, we must await orders from Central.”

“But sir,” said Lecsh, “the PSSU’s military has already surrendered, and the government has essentially surrendered in all but name. That being the case, can’t annexing the star systems of the PSSU be considered as within the purview of our operation?”

“It would be good if we could do it quietly. I think prodding the Federation forces is a questionable move.”

“Is that not excessively weak-kneed, sir?”

“**Deca-Commander**,” said Sobash calmly, “this is not the place to criticize your superiors.”

“I apologize.” Lecsh bowed her head in Pianzehk’s direction. “Still, my thoughts remain the same. Seeing as we have brought the PSSU into submission, I believe that our fleet is obligated to make the whole of its sphere of influence into a part of the **Empire**.”

“All the more reason we should save the extermination of the Federation’s forces for later, no?”

Lafier didn’t keep her subordinates from arguing. This was an informal meeting, and she wanted them to clash ideas and opinions.

“I’m not contending that we should advance on Emicooshi. I’m merely saying that we should work out plans to isolate Emicooshi as we proceed with all of the annexation.”

“I don’t see the Hanian ships letting us isolate them without a fight.”

“**Fleet 3** is more than capable of dealing with them, sir. How would you feel if we have **Fleet 1** scout out Federation territory, **Fleet 3** hold the Federation warships in check, and the other fleets absorb the former PSSU territory?”

“I see,” said Sobash. “You’re saying that if the Hanian forces retreat, then you don’t mind that result, either.”

“Yes, sir.” Lecsh stuck her chest out with pride.

Sobash looked relieved as he sipped his tea. Lafier figured that Sobash must have been testing her, in his Sobash way. If Lecsh had given the wrong answer, Sobash might have pushed for her to be discharged.

“Well, given the choice,” said Dasehf, “maybe we *should* go and exterminate them. If we do so now, we’ll take fewer losses overall.”

“You’re still of the opinion that if we exterminate the Federation forces in Emicooshi, the Federation itself will then surrender?” asked an exasperated Pianzehk.

“It’s less of an opinion and more of a guess,” he replied, a composed look on his face. “And I think it’s too early to conclude the possibility has been totally shot down. Might you agree with me, Officer Lecsh?”

“I have no way of knowing regarding the Federation’s potential surrender, but I believe destroying those forces to be desirable insofar as it will prevent anxiety about the future. Nevertheless, as *Glaharérh* Pianzehk said, targeting the Federation forces for extermination deviates from the mission of our fleet.” Then, unable to leave well enough alone, Lecsh added: “That being said, mightn’t we be forced to exterminate them eventually?”

Pianzehk looked at the **planar space map** and at Lecsh’s face in turn, then tilted his head to the side. “Anxiety about the future?”

“If we retake the **capital** through the **Wesco Portal**, I fear there’s a chance the forces in Emicooshi will threaten us from the rear.”

“Now we’re well and truly getting ahead of ourselves,” said Sobash, who glanced at Lafier’s face. Lafier wondered whether Sobash was thinking the research she’d told Lecsh and *Gnomboch* to do was gratuitous.

Lafier deliberately sidestepped the issue: “The *Saudec Émicuchir* (Emicooshi Portal) is a distance away from the **Wesco Portal**. It shouldn’t be cause for anxiety.”

“If that’s the case,” said Lecsh, “then there’s still less reason to exterminate them.”

“Out of pure curiosity,” said Dasehf, “is it possible for our fleet, at its current strength, to retake the capital?”

“That’s not possible,” replied Lafier immediately, and Lecsh nodded with a chagrined expression.

“**Your Highness**,” said Dasehf, “have you by any chance called for reinforcements?”

If Lafier had to say, Dasehf’s tone seemed concerned. She shook her head. “I’ve done no such thing. That stage is yet to come. I’m just having her make that proposal.”

Lafier had ordered the Report-Bearer, Ecryua, to suggest retaking the capital from the **Wesco Portal** as the **Thunderpeal Fleet**’s next operation. Yet Lafier herself would likely need to come for an audience with the **Emperor** before the operation was finalized. She longed for it with a burning passion. She didn’t, however, wish to continue to be told what her next mission was. In truth, what she really wanted was to be made the **Supreme Commander**. She wanted to make an impassioned speech at the **Supreme Command Base** in favor of retaking Lahkfacar at once.

“In any case,” said Sobash, “we can talk about that once **Associate Commodore** Ecryua and her group have returned. Right now, we have to hurry and conquer the PSSU’s former territory.”

“I agree,” nodded Lafier. “We must incorporate the PSSU into the Empire’s flesh and blood. Have **Fleet 1** monitor the enemy forces in Emicooshi for the time being. **Fleets 2** and **4** are to sortie. Inform the PSSU government once the star system incorporation schedule is settled on. If they request permission to send envoys, then accommodate them as best you can. We have a tradition of paying dead nations their due respect.”

Commanders-in-Chief Pianzehk and Dasehf left their seats and saluted before exiting.

Jint stood upright and bowed his head. “Do you have any other orders, ma’am?”

Lafier shook her head. “No.”

“Then may we consider this meeting adjourned?”

“Yes, that’s fine,” she nodded.

The **staff officers** stood up all at once and saluted her. Once she returned their salute, they then saluted *Lamlonh* before exiting. Jint was the only one beside her now.

“*Glaharérh*, let me guide you to the office.”

“I know full well where the office is.” She of course knew what Jint was insinuating; it was code for *you’ve got lots of work piled up for you*. “I can go by myself. You just relay my wishes to the PSSU government.”

“Roger that.” Then Jint left, too.

“Now then, *Nisoth*,” said Lafier, who stood up and saluted *Lamlonh*, “allow me to take my leave as well.”

“*Fiac*,” said *Lamlonh*, still seated. “I’d like to inquire as to your estimation of **Operation Thunderpeal**’s effectiveness — just out of personal interest.”

“Ma’am, I’m sure you have choice words regarding my performance, but I take pride in having been able to accomplish the mission almost flawlessly.”

“No,” she replied, head tilted in confusion and the corners of her mouth curled. “Are you dodging the question on purpose? I didn’t ask you for your self-assessment. It’s your opinion of the operation you were given I want to know. Do you think that it was worthy of the **Empire** concentrating its efforts?”

“No,” she replied immediately. “We should have concentrated our efforts into retaking Lahkfacar. That was what I was thinking when I received this mission, and I think so even more strongly now.”

“Will you continue to think so even if this mission leads to reestablishing contact with the **Skeer Monarchy**?”

“I will. Retaking Lahkfacar is our shortcut to victory.”

“Your stubbornness hasn’t changed,” she said, nodding with satisfaction. “Then should we make the next operation the retaking of Lahkfacar?”

“I can’t think of anything else.”

“Should **His Majesty** grant you a different mission, what would you do?”

The proper reply would have been that she would happily execute any and all imperial commands, but instead she turned it over in her mind.

Lamlonh burst into laughter. “So candid.”

“What do you mean, ma’am?”

“I mean what I said, *Fiac*. I think you’re suited to being **Empress**. Only...”

“Only?”

But *Lamlonh* didn’t answer, instead requesting a new cup of tea from the robo-waiter. “This battle isn’t just uncharted territory for the

Empire. It's uncharted territory for all humanity."

"Yes, ma'am, it is."

"I'm sure a number of things will happen. Things the **Empire** has never before experienced."

"With all due respect, *Nisoth*, it's not that those things will just happen. It's that we will *make* them happen."

"How gallant, *Fiac*." Envy rang when the **Abdicant** pronounced her **title**. "When you and I chat, the feeling I'm just a bystander truly sinks in."

Lafier didn't say anything in response. She just stared at *Lamlonh* with her head held high.

Lafier's *frocragh* detected somebody approaching from behind. She didn't need to turn around; she knew it was the man who had just left, only to return.

"You needn't worry," she said, irritated. "I'm coming."

"That's not it, *Glaharérh*," said Jint. "It appears that while we were holding our meeting, the government of the PSSU made an important determination."

"Don't put on airs."

Jint grinned. "The nation of the People's Sovereign Stellar Union has officially surrendered. Within thirty minutes after they receive our approval, President Amani will issue his last presidential order and transfer all power to the *Glaharérh* before resigning." Then he whispered into her ear: "Nice going, Lafier!"

Lafier pretended not to have heard that last bit. "Understood. I approve."

"I will relay your approval, ma'am."

"I'd like to speak with His Excellency the President forthwith."

"The President has said he would prefer to speak after the transferal of power. Would that be all right?"

"That's fine."

"Then I'll open a communication circuit with the Former President as soon as possible." Jint saluted Lafier and *Lamlonh* and exited the room.

Lamlonh stood up and bowed to Lafier. "Congratulations, *Fiac*. An interstellar nation, stately and grand, now lies in the palm of your hand, *Fiac Lamhirr Casynresiac* (Your Highness, Lafier the Conqueror)."

Chapter 15: The Sescarr Viscountdom

The base of operations of the **Area 2 Fleet**, the star system known as the **Secarr Viscountdom**, was virtually a war plant. **Antimatter fuel factories** were being mass produced in its asteroid belt, accelerating toward the sun of Sescarr moments after completion. Uninterrupted chains of factories connected the asteroid belt and the system's sun. As soon as the orbital trajectories of the factories near that star were fine-tuned, they began condensing its light into antimatter.

The suppliers of **antimatter fuel** weren't the only things getting mass-produced in the asteroid belt. The consumers of that fuel — spaceships — were also being constructed in immense numbers.

Unlike **antimatter fuel factories**, which ran unmanned, spaceships needed people to steer and operate them. The **Area 2 Fleet** resolved their personnel shortage in two main ways. The first was aggregating all of the manpower of the **Skeer Monarchy** into this star system. They gave up trying to maintain many **territory-nations** and **domains**, and appropriated **nobles** and their **servant vassals** as well as **Merchant Ship Company** crews into the **Star Forces**. The second was cutting down on **NCCs**, almost all of whom were emergency personnel. By choosing to forgo damage control measures, they were able to drastically reduce the number of **NCCs** needed. Naturally, this meant the survivability of the ships took a hit, but Dubeus emphasized quantity over quality. Because of that, the **Sescarr Viscountdom** was overflowing with vessels. The orbital area around its core, the planet Dalcarr, was particularly crowded.

Packed within that congestion lay the *Béic Roispeunaigr* (Vice Emperor's Palace). The **Picket Fleet Commander-in-Chief**, Duhier, accompanied the secret Hanian parlementaire, Colonel Om, to visit the **Vice Emperor's Palace**. At its **Audience Chamber**, the **Area 2 Fleet Chief of Staff**, **Star Forces Admiral** Cohtponee, was waiting as well.

Ambassador Om updated the two heads of **Area 2** on the situation. Dubeus and Cohtponee were already aware, given that the details had already been reported to them via transmission, but they listened with evident interest.

“Emicooshi, you say.” The **Vice Emperor** Dubeus tilted his head. **Star Forces soldiers** were very familiar with the name

“Emicooshi.” It was a PSSU military base.

“Yes. It appears they plan not to return to their own nation, but to remain stationed in Emicooshi,” said Hania’s parlementaire.

“They’re surprisingly stubborn.”

“Is it true that if your nation’s forces in Emicooshi are destroyed, the Federation will surrender?” asked Cohtponee.

Duhier had only learned of this recently, but they had established relations with the Federation government a few years prior.

In the Hania Federation, whenever it came time to decide on a political measure, the counsel of an artificial intelligence was regarded as extremely important. It was even said that in point of fact, it was the AI that did the deciding, and the job of the politicians was merely to feed their preferences into it.

When the war broke out, the AI advised Hania to surrender to the **Empire** right off the bat, and for very simple reasons. The Empire had staying power in spades, and the AI predicted that the Empire would win in the end. If the Federation became part of the Empire, then its chances of victory only rose higher. Allying itself to the Empire was out of the question, as the Abh had never once struck an alliance with another nation, and even if by some miracle an alliance was formed between them, then once the Empire-Hania Alliance won, Hania holding its own unaided against the Empire was just not going to happen.

Of course, the AI didn’t advise for surrender solely because the Empire seemed too strong. It was widely known that the Empire didn’t meddle in the affairs of the residents of planets. This didn’t apply to the Federation alone, but it was uncommon for the people of a landworld to think of matters on other planets as something that concerned them. Most citizens generally didn’t mind who ruled the space above the atmosphere so long as it didn’t affect their lives.

Meanwhile, the United Humankind, the People’s Sovereign Stellar Union, and the Greater Alkont Republic believed in the existence of universal values. It was a point of consternation for them that there existed gaps between those values and the values of the worlds of the Federation that were difficult to bridge. Indeed, the Federation was the odd man out among the FNA. Even if the FNA won, it was only a matter of time before the Federation would wane under the other nations’ arm-twisting, or so the AI foresaw. And if that was true, then briskly becoming part of the Empire made logical sense. The AI had even augured that accepting rule by the Empire would lead to a greater degree of happiness for the worlds of the Federation, a fact that depressed Hania’s leaders.

As one might expect, however, the backlash against the idea of surrendering without a fight was something to behold. The end result

of this was a half-hearted policy — remaining neutral. The AI was apparently extremely critical of the decisions the Federation's leaders took. Then again, the humans harbored their own misgivings regarding the AI. There were many among the military and interstellar transport carriers in particular who advocated for scrapping the AI. That faction was called the Alliancists (the same faction that Dasehf had dubbed the space faction, though the people in this room had no way of knowing that). The "land faction," on the other hand, were simply called the Conservatives, and as they viewed the AI as oracular, their opposition to the Alliancists intensified over time.

The war progressed largely as the AI had predicted. Moreover, when the Conservatives gained power, they strove to make a Hanian surrender to the Empire a reality. But the military, still controlled by the Alliancists, secretly got in touch with its former allied nations and forcibly brought Hania into the war. The government panicked, but they had no choice but to rubber-stamp the military's actions. As a result, the FNA succeeded in taking Lahkfacar, and gained control of the three monarchies of Clyoov, Ileesh, and Bargzedeh.

Be that as it may, the AI continued to criticize the foolish humans, stating that the Empire was still plenty powerful, and that they would surrender eventually. And signs of another Empire counteroffensive now loomed into view.

"Well, that is why the military used all their strength to defend the PSSU. But it seems that all in all, the burden was too great."

"I don't imagine all of your military's forces are now based in Emicooshi, though."

"No, but the Alliancists have no other pieces on the board. The rescue fleet for Emicooshi is commanded by the leader of the Alliancists, Admiral Aye Rynen. The officers who sympathize with her have also been aggregated into that fleet. All the other corps are loyal to the government. As such, I think it's highly likely they will surrender."

"You speak as though it has nothing to do with you."

"In a way, it doesn't. It isn't my job to decide."

"Are you against surrendering, Ambassador?"

Om laughed. "I'm not exactly pleased by the idea. I *am* a military man. Yet the rational thing to do is conform to the AI. I believe being able to live at ease and as we are, under the Empire, is the best possible future. That's disappointing, but the rational choice is sometimes torture emotionally. Resisting that emotional impulse is the way the civilized must live. That is why I support the Empire."

"And you would give us territory as a sign of your support?"

"Unfortunately, it isn't as though we are fighting it out through an election," Om shrugged. "If we could simply settle this through a vote,

it would be easier for us.”

“If your nation surrenders,” Duhier found himself asking, “won’t most of the territory get occupied by the UH and Greater Alkont?”

There were four people in the conference room: the **Vice Emperor**, the **Chief of Staff**, the secret messenger from an enemy nation... and Duhier, who felt it strange he was mixed in among them.

“We believe they will prioritize keeping Lahkfacar,” said Om matter-of-factly.

“They won’t both continue to occupy the capital and acquire new territories?”

“That would be very difficult. Though the chances that they seek to expand their sphere of influence from Lahkfacar are high.”

“You refer to the **Clyoov Portal**?”

The **Clyoov Monarchy**, one of the eight monarchies that made up the Empire, had been surrounded by the Hania Federation since before the war began. It seemed as though at present, all of the territories of the **Clyoov Monarchy** were delegated to the Federation.

“Yes. We’re predicting an invasion from the **Clyoov Portal**. And our nation does not intend to stop it,” said Om flatly. “We have, however, concluded that the UH occupation will be temporary. The way the UH is structured, it takes them time to incorporate a star system they occupy into their economic sphere. For a time, it will be nothing but a burden to them. In that respect, your nation has a much more refined operation.”

“In that respect?”

“In the respect of making what belongs to others your own.”

“We appreciate the words of praise,” said Cohtponee with a conflicted expression.

“You’ve done good work here, Mr. Parlementaire,” said Dubeus. “Let us show you to your quarters. And make yourself at home.”

Two **guard NCCs** came in.

“Thank you very much,” bowed Om. “I will excuse myself for now, but I would like to promptly return to my post alongside your nation’s Special Envoy.”

“We are aware, Mr. Parlementaire.”

Dubeus nodded, and Om followed the **NCCs** out of there.

Duhier watched as the parlementaire left, then looked at his father. “Should I prepare to send him off?”

“No,” said Dubeus, “let’s let someone else do that, *Lartsoc Clybr* (Prince of Clyoov). There will be a different mission for you.”

“What would that be?”

“That remains to be seen, *negac* (hotspur).” Dubeus rested his chin in his hands. “We have two paths before us.”

“One being to maintain the status quo?”

“Yes. And at that moment, we must make our guard more austere. I’ll reinforce your fleet.”

“*Borfiac* (Your Highnesses),” said Cohtponee, “please forget about that path. It’s time for us to fly this roost.”

Dubeus rested his chin in his hands.

Chapter 16: The *Clateugac Murenragr* (Liquidator of Interstellar Powers)

No ceremony of surrender was conducted for the People's Sovereign Stellar Union. With a declaration by the former nation's final President, the PSSU became no more.

The PSSU was the largest interstellar power that the **Empire** had ever overthrown. For that reason, there were those who believed this called for a magnificent ceremony, but Lafier dismissed the idea: "Keeping in consideration the feelings of the citizens of the former PSSU, we shouldn't hold any kind of ceremony." And that sentiment was no lie, though to tell the truth, it was also the case that they were busy enough already, and she didn't want to spend time and resources on pure ceremony. Plus, like a true *Nëic Dubreuscr*, she detested such stiff and formal rituals. To her, humoring these "restorers of sovereignty" was enough. The war wasn't over, after all, and she couldn't muster the mood to make merry midway through it.

Officially, Lafier was now the ruler of the territories formerly part of the PSSU. The judiciary was still adjudicating based on the laws of the bygone nation, but the legislature had a new *raison d'être* as an advisory organ for her. The administration was now sending agenda items that were once for the President's eyes to **Thunderpeal Fleet Command**. And it fell to Jint to deal with those. In a truly surprising turn, he was a talented administrative officer.

"This is easier than being your **Adjutant**, Lafier," he'd said bluntly.

While he was still technically her Adjutant, he'd left that work to a subordinate. Right now, he was exclusively serving as a go-between between the government of the former PSSU and Lafier. The final word was always reserved for Lafier, but Jint commented on all of the agenda items with his opinions, and she followed his advice. There had been no issues so far.

"I don't mind letting you give it your undivided attention," said Lafier. "You ought to emigrate to Kyle Gohmbeh while you're at it." But she wasn't being serious, and it was understood that that was just another silly little joke between them — and not least because she didn't intend to allow the government of the former PSSU to continue to exist for much longer. It was only being kept around because, were it to disappear too abruptly, it would cause chaos. That being said,

now that the PSSU was no more, the former nation's agencies and institutions were scheduled to be abolished in due time.

Jint, meanwhile, was still handling unremarkable everyday matters for the most part, but the massive undertaking that was the liquidation of a nation had begun. And as a result of that massive undertaking, the former PSSU dispatched a special envoy to the **Crown Princess's Interim Palace**.

Lafier welcomed that envoy at the rose garden.

"It has been quite a while, **Your Highness**," said Special Envoy Janet Macalli.

"I'm happy to hear you're in good health, Ms. Envoy."

Macalli had formerly been an ambassador who resided in the Empire. Once, when Lafier was just a child, they had exchanged a few words of courtesy at some ceremony. Lafier had totally forgotten about her, and was only reminded by staff just before their meeting.

Naturally, the words they would exchange here and now were of a formal nature. Macalli voiced a handful of requests, but Lafier didn't make any promises. She was entrusting the practical affairs to Jint.

"Kindly consult with the **Count of Hyde**."

The **Count of Hyde** was standing behind and to the side of Macalli.

"I will hear your requests over there," said Jint, spurring Macalli amiably on. "We have a few suggestions of our own."

And with that, they exited the room. Then Sobash entered, as though he'd been long waiting for them to leave. Sobash briefly reported the status of the war. Not much had changed. The **Star Forces** were quietly seizing and occupying the territories of the PSSU, and the Hanian military was still squatting in Emicooshi.

"Is the enemy showing no sign of withdrawing from Emicooshi?"

"Exterminating them is possible even with our current force of arms. However, until such time as we receive a new imperial command, I believe maintaining our current policy is best."

"Very well," nodded Lafier.

Emicooshi could wait. And if that was the case, then...

Lafier looked at the **planar space map** projected over her desk, searching for the **Wesco Portal** among the countless **portals** scattered about. She was waiting expectantly for the imperial command to retake Lahkfacar.

"A new transmission has arrived from Central," said Sobash, though his extremely light tone told her this wasn't important information.

"What is it?"

"It seems thirty-two **magistrate** candidates are headed this way."

"That should ease up our workload."

In the future, **nobles** would be appointed to the star systems of the former PSSU. But the war was still on, and there could be no assurances. Consequently, the **Emperor** became those systems' nominal **Lord**, and **magistrates** would be dispatched to each system. Until then, **military personnel** would handle the necessary duties as **Liege Agents**.

Liege Agent work had been foisted on Lafier before. It was nerve-racking work, and she felt bad making her subordinates do it. Replacing them with bureaucrats who were specially trained for managing the territories would lead to the well-being and happiness of a great many. These thirty-two had to be the first wave. More such bureaucrats were sure to come one after the other, and together, they would remake the sphere of influence of the former PSSU into building blocks for the Empire.

"In addition, there was also an unofficial question for you: Are we prepared to accept cats?"

"Cats?" Lafier raised her eyebrows. "Is this question from **His Majesty**?"

"Presumably."

To the Abh, cats were not just lovable creatures. They were a symbol of the commonplace. As they lived their lives aboard spaceships, during peacetime, the Abh raised their children and kept their pets even while aboard warships. When peace gave way to war, the order "**all ships, drop off your cats**" was issued. And when that happened, objects that were close to the heart but didn't typically see use, and the children being raised aboard ship were among the people and things dropped off to a safer location along with the cats. Even if one didn't have a cat, they would unload everything besides their everyday necessities and prepare for battle, so the command was meaningful for all **military personnel**. When **Training Fleet 3** was formed, Lafier had issued that command, for she interpreted **Training Fleet 3** as a combat-operational fleet. In actuality, **Training Fleet 3** never saw an engagement while it was still Training Fleet 3, but she didn't regret issuing that order.

And now she was being asked whether they would take back the cats.

What does this mean? Lafier wondered. Is he telling me to settle down in Nohv Kinshass? Wait, he never said "take back." He's just asking if we're willing to take any cats.

If Lafier so wished, she could take a breather from being on the offensive and devote herself to managing the new territories, but needless to say, that wasn't what Lafier wanted. She fixed her gaze on the **Wesco Portal** on the **planar space map** once again.

"No," she stated flatly. "We can't yet prepare any place soothing

enough for cats.”

For indeed, while she couldn't speak for other cats, the only place fit for cats born in the **Imperial Palace** to take their ease was Lahkfacar.

Afterword

To my regret, I've once again kept you waiting, but all the same I welcome you to this, the beginning of Part 2 of *Banner of the Stars*.

About ten years have passed since the Fall of Lahkfacar, as depicted in the previous installment. The Abhs you know haven't changed much, but Jint is no longer really a "young man," appearance-wise.

I'm sure you've already taken note of it, but dates in this series are vague. I'm making it that way on purpose. Simultaneity has fallen by the wayside now that we've reached the galactic stage. While episodes that take place around single planets or inside single ships are a different beast, when the scale goes galactic, time gaps between the actions of characters separated by vast stretches of space become commonplace.

Granted, when it comes to *Banner*, since none of the characters are traveling for long periods at sublight speeds, or under immense gravity, the time gaps involved are probably only around a few days at most. That being said, if you were to ask Lafier and Duhier how many days back the Fall of Lahkfacar occurred, their answers would conflict. Moreover, since the stage is so vast, conveying information to others across space takes time.

It's not unlike the Exploration Age in that regard. Back then, whenever nations struck deals or came to agreements, that news wouldn't make it to the farther reaches of their domains, so it wasn't uncommon for wars to continue. This series's universe operates under that paradigm, too.

The passage of time differs depending on the character, so please think of it as "around ten years have passed since the Fall of Lahkfacar for most people."

In addition, allow me to say that it's even more difficult to measure how far into the future this story takes place compared to our era. As I believe I've written elsewhere, our time is "three hundred years ago" to Jint and "two thousand years ago" to Lafier.

In any case, if you were to ask me what's gone down during this past decade or so in-story, I'd tell you that nothing particularly momentous has occurred. The Empire lost Lahkfacar, and has been working strenuously to restore its military power and reorganize its systems. Its territory has been torn apart, with no ability to contact

each other. Each isolated section's leadership is united, but they're also suffering from their estrangement from landworlds. They may be putting on airs conducting themselves as though they're not sweating, but in truth, they're having a woeful time of it.

On the other hand, while the Four Nations Alliance may have felled Lahkfacar and made impressive inroads into Empire territory, they remain unable to recover the majority of the territory that had been taken from them during the initial stages of the war. Moreover, they're not moving in lockstep. As a matter of fact, they had conducted that attack under the notion that if they could just take Lahkfacar, the whole Empire would crumble in short order. Unfortunately for them, that did not come to pass. As a result, discord and friction have arisen between the Alliance's constituent powers, and the leadership is hard put pacifying their respective citizenries. None of the major powers have the energy, time, or money to sponsor a large-scale operation. Instead, small-scale operations occur near the borders of their spheres of influence, and even then, only occasionally.

To liken it to boxing, they're rehydrating in the corner, and in a sad state of affairs, none of the powers are ringing the gong. If they wanted to take a break, the boxers would have to come to a mutual understanding, but neither side has any intention of discussing things, so they just keep trading jabs at the center of the ring even as they devise ways to recuperate.

And at last, now that the Empire has finished its preparations and gone on the offensive, the curtain rises on Part 2.

In Volume I of *CREST OF THE STARS*, Lafier foresaw the war lasting a long time. I had her say that because I believe a war between interstellar powers in this setting would get extremely drawn out, like the Hundred Years War between France and Britain. My conception of an interstellar war hasn't changed, but I do think it should take less than a century for it to conclude. Or at least, I'd like to make it so!

I do hope you'll continue keeping me company throughout.

July 25, 2018

Selected Glossary, Part 7

The following glossary is a curated version of the working document used throughout the translation process. As such, some portions of it are arranged topically rather than alphabetically. The “complete” glossary is a substantially larger document, spanning many dozens of pages of Baronh words, their English translations, and explanatory translator’s notes. Further selections from the glossary will be made available in the future, as the series progresses.

Note that true Baronh does not have capitalization, as it is written in the ath script.

General Glossary: Verbs

- Agaimē: to kill.
- Agautre: to manipulate, to control.
- Airhate: to thank.
- Aloce: to treat as.
- Ane: to be (usually of inanimate objects or abstract concepts), to have.
 - Translator’s note: corresponds to the Japanese *aru*. It is also the copula verb “is.”
- Arabre: to be in excess.
- Arobe: to play, to hang out.
- Ase: to be empty, to open, to be open.
- Bacse: to entrust.
- Badoēbe: to prolong, to draw out, to do something slowly.
- Bate: to wait.
- Bause: to increase, to contribute.
- Bautee: to don, to wear.
- Béare: to draw attention.
 - Translator’s note: related to the noun *béc*, eye.
- Béie: to be visible.
- Bicfaimee: to cross-check.
- Bie: to see, to view.
- Bisee: to show.
- Bissodae: to miss seeing, to misjudge, to lose confidence in.
- Bitpice: to guide (around).
- Blobée: to pursue, to want, to request.

- Boe: to think.
 - Boée: to appear likely.
 - Bolarse: to bring.
 - Bone: to do.
- Translator's note: this is equivalent to the archaic Japanese word *monosu*, which has many meanings.

- Bote: to (a)wait.
- Botnase: to bring about.
- Buce: to face, to head toward.
- Busaïe: to greet, to go out to meet.
- Cadase: to speak, to chat.
- Caire: to enter, to come in.
- Caisre: to run.
- Canse: to speak.
- Cansune: to be able to speak.
- Carsyre: to fill one's stomach with.
- Catime: to initiate, to start (transitive).
- Ceurehare: to magnify, to expand.
- Cice: to pull, to draw back.
- Cicfase: to introduce.
- Cluge: to make oneself at home, to get cozy.
- Criage: to earn.
- Cüaire: to howl or bellow.
- Dacnéare: to become forbidden.
- Dacnéarlér: to be forbidden.
- Dagbée: to look or gaze at.
- Dagnée: to flow.
- Dairee: to grow accustomed.
- Daïsaire: to unmoor.
- Dare: to become.
- Darlate: to come into effect or existence.
- Débure: to sleep.
- Diage: to wish for.
- Dobe: to believe, to drink.
- Dore: to board a vessel.
- Dtire: to trample, to overrun.
- Éti sofaire: to be seriously damaged.
- Facre: to understand, to occur.
- Fae: to sustain (damage).
- Faice: to awaken.
- Faise: to get up (out of bed).
- Fame: to reckon or think.

○ Translator's note: this has a more emotionally affected connotation than in English.

- Fasare: to understand.
- Fasnére: to forget.
- Féce: to receive, to incur, to accept.
- Féce lame: to take a hit (e.g. bullets, bombing).
- Fécee: to understand; can also mean “roger that.”
- Fécinée: to be satisfied (that something makes sense), to be convinced or persuaded of something.
- Fée: to starve.
- Flare: to go across.
- Force: to perceive via frocragh.
- Gaimecice: to exercise restraint and decline.
- Gare: to do.
- Gausme: to rest.
- Ghocme: to nurture, to rear up.
- Gobe: to read, to call.
- Gochire: to intersect (specifically of routes).
- Gorsfe: to rejoice (over something).
- Grace: to open (intransitive).
- Gurse: to permit, to forgive; also used to say that one “doesn’t care.”
- Hare: to move upward.
- Hoce: to operate, to be powered by.
- Īarbe: to select.
- Īare: to obtain.
- Icare: to assert.
- Ie: to say.
- Īére: to put in, to insert.
- Igaubre: to completely lose airtightness.
- Ine: to be required.
- Iri sacre: to be on one’s mind.
- Iri saice: to worry about.
- Isare: to get angry.
- Ise: to go.
- Isire: to live.
- Issae: to go back and forth.
- Labote: to retain, to preserve.
- Ladœsme / launerime: to enjoy, to have fun.
- Laïe: to bestow.
- Laïe dar béri: to show; literally, “to bestow upon your eyes.”
- Laince: to wear (a circlet) on one’s head.
- Laisdame: to have a taste for, to indulge in.
- Lanote: to preserve, to maintain.
- Lége: to be wrong or different.
- Lobare: to lodge.

- Lobe: to fly, to leap.
- Loce: to use.
- Lœdame: to run (a business), to practice (a vocation).
- Lœze: to close.
- Loma: to share (an experience with someone), to be with.
- Lonote: to preserve (one's standing).
- Loraigee: to deprive/confiscate, to cover (a topic), to pick up.
- Lore: to take.
- Lorrémre: to regulate, to set limits on.
- Lorsure: to fetch, to go get something.
- Lüamse: to enrich, to make wealthy.
- Luce: to arrive.
- Lucgaubre: to burst through, to rise above.
- Lucsure: to come with.
- Ludore: to recruit, to solicit for.
- Lume: to pile up, accumulate.
- Lure: to stumble upon or discover something.
- Lyge: to inform, to pronounce.
- Monzée: to set sail.
- Nae: to wash.
- Naüse: to turn or spin, to circulate.
- Naüse cêl: to veer or change course; literally "to turn [one's] head."
- Nége: to love.
- Niae: to put in, to insert.
- Nilore: to care for (the sick).
- Nisate: to side with, to stand up for.
- Noce: to walk.
- Nocsue: to come walking.
- Obe: to think or feel (something).
- Pœre: to seem to be, to be regarded as.
- Ptusare: to establish or come into contact with.
- Ragre: to degrade, to deteriorate.
- Razaimée: to decide on, to set in stone.
- Rérpére: to look into (research), to check out.
- Reute: to split off (from a given pocket of space-time).
- Ribése: to display.
- Rine: to die.
- Riniare: to lay in stock, to procure.
- Rire: to learn of, to come to know.
- Rirse: to note (write down), to fill in.
- Rodaïe: to prepare, to make ready.
- Roe: to assault or attack.
- Rubase: to get over with, to bring an end to.

- Ruhose: to spend time.
- Rume: to live in.
- Rure: to do.
- Sabaïe: to set up (shop).
- Sace: to lack.
- Sacee: to wager or bet.
- Sacoce: to register, to write, to place.
- Sacre: to take (e.g. time, money); equivalent to the Japanese word *kakaru*, which has many other meanings.
- Sae: to purchase.
- Saice: to let hang, to cover; among many other definitions.
 - Translator's note: this is equivalent to the Japanese word *kakeru*, which has many, many meanings.
- Saïe: to modify.
- Saigre: to restrict, to be limited to.
 - Translator's note: also used for the grammatical construction "in case ____" (*baai* in Japanese).
- Saisere: to soar (through the heavens).
 - Translator's note: the Japanese word this is equivalent to, *amagakeru*, is most often used of gods/spirits, or of human souls.
- Same: to mind, to be concerned about.
- Sanhaïe: to think about.
- Sannaze: to do without fail.
- Sanrime: to be sad, to lament over.
- Sanssaicee: to start a conversation, to address or accost someone.
- Saüae: to meet with.
- Sausnée: To graze, to glance off of, to skim, to narrowly miss, to pass by quickly.
- Sice: to listen.
- Sie: to wear, to put on, to learn.
- Snaie: to dislike, to be leery of.
- Soïe: to exceed.
- Solaïe: to comply with, to cater to.
- Somname: to leave the way it is.
- Somme: to like, prefer.
- Sorpée: to compare.
- Sores: to live (one's life).
- Stuce: to continue (intransitive), to last.
- Styme: to sink (of a ship).
- Sue: to prepare in advance, to set up.
- Sure: to be granted (authorization).
- Syre: to be given, to be done (a favor).

- Translator's note: equivalent to *kureru* in Japanese.
- Syree: to be done (a favor); in conjunction with the verb of said favor.
- Syree sote lucsurā: to follow (the speaker).
- Thapére: to speak, talk, or chat.
- Tosée: to deposit, to leave (something) with (someone).
- Tosée scare: to make a deposit (of money).
- Üace: to put or place.
- Üacre: to occur, to get angry.
- Üafare: to end (intransitive).
- Üaiponére: to grow infirm (through age).
- Üaucre: to send.
- Ubare: to be born.
- Üére: to descend, to get off, to step down, to be issued.
- Ulloute: to defeat, to overthrow, to smite.
- Usere: to transfer (intransitive), to immigrate/emigrate.
- Zase: to take out, to retrieve, to turn in, to send; also, to transmit a signal, etc.
- Zée: to leave, to exit, to come out; also used to mean “from [home area].”
- Zée lutoëmeri: to leave, to report for work.
- Zorce: to be surprised or startled.



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Banner of the Stars: Volume 6

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First published in Japan in 2018 by Hayakawa Publishing Corporation

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Ebook edition 1.0: April 2021